벨노르피아

아카데미 장애인 전형 생도가 되었다

두두두우

판타지 장편소설

I BECAME THE ACADEMY'S DISABLED STUDENT

– 아카데미 장애인 전형 생도가 되었다 –

- VOLUME 3 -

-AUTHOR-
두두두우

[KINGMTL]

CHAPTER 101
STUDYING (1)

Since Shio-ram is an educational institution, it assesses and grades its students.

The most basic aspects are attendance scores and attitude scores. This is a common method that anyone can understand.

Just make sure to attend lectures and maintain a good attitude.

However, in terms of the overall percentage, these scores are practically negligible.

The bulk of the actual scores come from three major evaluations.

The first is the regular assessments taken at the end of each lecture session.

Just hearing the name makes me shiver; it's the main reason I struggle to keep up with the coursework.

Assignments and tests are thrown at me from a syllabus I haven't fully caught up on, making it a nightmare.

Looking at my report card, it's clear that my early grades were particularly poor…

I should be grateful that, being at the beginning of the semester, there aren't many assignments.

Probably after the break, starting next semester, assignments will pour in like snow as lecture hours decrease.

The second major evaluation is the common assessments like dungeon

practice or tower entry.

This section also carries a lot of weight in terms of points. Fortunately, I did fairly well in this area.

Last time in dungeon practice… if you overlook the magic issues, I did quite well and received decent scores.

In the tower, a series of fortunate events led me to receive scores higher than my actual abilities.

The third major evaluation is the midterm exam, held once every semester.

These three evaluations make up the majority of the grades.

And the schedule set for two weeks from now is the midterm exam.

Midterms weren't a significant event in the original work.

They're exams held once every semester, and they're divided mainly into written and practical tests.

The schedule spans five days, from Monday to Friday. The first two days are for written exams, and the remaining three days are for practical tests.

Since I'm receiving combat major lectures from Professor Atra… no, my master, I'll be taking the combat major practical exam, and I'll probably enter the tournament as well.

Walking around the campus lately, I noticed the library and training rooms were packed with students.

Although it was always somewhat crowded, Shio-ram students rarely had low academic enthusiasm.

But as the midterms approached, the number of students increased, and their motivation was visibly higher.

Part of the reason is the high weightage of the midterms, but another reason is that unlike regular or common assessments, parts of this exam are open to the public.

I believe some practical tests and the tournament will be broadcasted.

In other words, it's an event suitable for garnering reputation points.

Midterms don't have a severe impact like the protagonist dying from one mistake or significantly hindering the player's growth.

If I had to pinpoint, it affects the player's growth evaluation and reputation points? Reputation points were something to be mindful of.

In the initial runs, I paid a lot of attention to reputation.

It was challenging to suppress tower invasions or high-level dungeon rampages alone.

My combat power was insignificant, and even if I were somewhat strong, there were limits to what I could do alone.

I always teamed up with strong characters like the protagonist.

So I put a lot of effort into side quests and tried to increase as many characters' favorability as possible.

After Baek Ahrin betrayed me in the eighth run, I quickly abandoned that approach.

At that time, I was attached to the NPCs. Although I did side quests with the intent to clear the game, I wouldn't have tried if it wasn't enjoyable.

Baek Ahrin was a character I particularly cherished.

When that beloved character stabbed me in the back, causing the most successful run to end in futility, I was dumbfounded.

From then on, I changed my play style.

Getting betrayed by Baek Ahrin, who seemed unlikely to ever betray, made me suspicious.

If Baek Ahrin could betray me, what about other characters? It hadn't happened before, but it might in the future. But Baek Ahrin was a character I never thought would betray me.

If a party member betrayed me at a critical moment and ended the run… I felt I wouldn't be able to control my anger…

And I felt a turning point was needed.

So I abandoned managing favorability and the insistence on the good route. I grew tired of immersing myself in the player character and trying to save every extra NPC.

In the later runs, I didn't pay much attention to reputation.

Of course, I managed it moderately since starting the run with a bad reputation would hinder growth.

But at some point, I even discarded that and wreaked havoc.

The run where this chaos peaked was the 11th 'Diamond Warrior' run.

A significant amount of high-level information, such as secret records of the three major families, locations and internal views of other mystical realms, was obtained while making a mess as the Diamond Warrior.

Anyhow, midterms weren't a significant event in the original work. Making a mistake didn't lead to any severe consequences later.

'Still, I shouldn't take it lightly.'

However, for Lee Hayul, a student at Shio-ram, it was a very important

schedule.

There are no students who get held back at Shio-ram. Unless they cause serious trouble, they don't get expelled either.

But that doesn't mean there's any reason to take the midterms lightly.

Given my situation, it's clear what would happen if I took it lightly.

So I've been staying up for days, preparing for the midterms.

I ditched the habit of 'opening a book and reading' to maintain some semblance of human behavior.

I just crammed the information into my head using the power of observation. I put off understanding for later and just stuffed the information into my head.

My head throbbed in pain, but it only resulted in a slight nosebleed. It even felt like my brain capacity was growing.

I needed to prepare for more than just the written exams.

In fact, the practical tests, which carried more weight, needed more preparation.

I had to prepare for practical tests in several subjects and also for the tournament…

The schedule made me sigh.

Despite that, my mind was quite alert.

After hearing my master's past and establishing our teacher-student relationship, I slept for a few hours straight.

When I came to, the major lecture was over.

Reluctantly, I had to get up from my master's embrace.

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The Second Natural Park, located on one side of Shio-ram's grounds.

Sitting on the grass, which was covered in a cool air, I poked at the blue light balls floating before me.

The spirits fluttering around me trembled as if ticklish and rubbed against my fingers.

There was no warmth, but instead, a subtle softness transmitted to my fingertips. It might have been an illusion, but they seemed to be in a good mood.

"Spirits are really fascinating. I thought they were just natural energies, but they're so playful."

[Indeed]

"Or maybe it's just you they're playful with…"

The 'Understanding Spirits' lecture.

Unlike the first day, which ended with an affinity test, from the second day onward, the proper lectures began.

Liana used her contracted spirits to demonstrate what we learned in theory.

She explained how to assist in collaboration with a spirit master during practical situations and how to counter and exploit weaknesses when facing a spirit master, emphasizing practical applications.

Given that Liana herself was a hero who had fought on the African frontlines, the information's reliability was unquestionable.

Despite continuing with the lecture, I received special treatment.

That's because I was a student confirmed to have spirit affinity. It was practically certain that I would eventually delve into spirit arts.

The other students seemed to understand this.

Moreover, I wasn't the only student receiving special treatment.

During the short break, Elia, sipping on water, patted the spirit with a curious expression… she was touching it.

Surprisingly, Elia also had confirmed spirit affinity.

While the exact level of affinity wasn't measured, it was generally considered quite high.

That meant Elia would become a noble among nobles, possessing a recovery-type unique ability, decent magic skills, and spirit arts.

"Hayul, are you using the necklace well?"

As I was recalling this morning's theory while playing with the spirit, Elia, who had been poking the spirit, glanced at my necklace and asked.

[Yes, I'm using it very well. I can control it well now, so there's no need to worry.]

That was sincere. Although there were still some parts where control was tricky, I was really using it well.

Losing one hand made me think hologram chatting would be difficult, but thanks to this necklace, the voice issue was practically resolved.

When I repeatedly thanked her, Elia finally nodded in relief.

As I was about to observe the spirit again, a now-familiar presence approached quickly.

“Hayul, Elia? If you’re free this weekend, would you like to study together to prepare for the midterms?”

Baek Ahrin approached quickly and made a sudden suggestion.

“If it’s the weekend… I’m fine with it.”

Despite the sudden suggestion, Elia nodded without much thought.

Baek Ahrin’s gaze turned to me.

‘Hmm… ’

Feeling her gaze, I fell into brief contemplation. Studying together on the weekend…

‘…Do we really need to?’

I felt it might be better to study quietly alone. While some people might find it easier and better to study with close friends, I don’t think I’m one of them.

Or am I? Considering Baek Ahrin is the top student, studying with her might make studying easier.

‘What should I do… ’

While contemplating whether to accept or decline, I noticed Baek Ahrin subtly gesturing.

The angle made it invisible to Elia, who was standing nearby.

Her hand pointed to her own ample chest.

What could that mean? As I tilted my head in confusion, Baek Ahrin smirked playfully and mouthed the words.

– That time, apology, compensation

The power of observation naturally interpreted her lip movements.

[Sorry]

[Yes]

[I'm okay too]

…After a brief contemplation, I accepted.

Thinking it might be better to learn from the top student.

CHAPTER 102
STUDYING (2)

The morning of the weekend.

Most people would feel the sluggishness of the early morning and bury their faces in their pillows again.

Those who must work even on weekends would kick off their blankets, cursing the world.

I had a rather unique start to my weekend morning.

– Ugh, bleeegh…!

Like someone who drank heavily and couldn't control their upset stomach, I was gripping the toilet and vomiting early in the morning.

I had already emptied my stomach. Now, only stomach acid and water were coming out.

Yet my stomach kept pushing something out as if there was still more to expel.

– Bleeeeh…

The only fortunate thing was that my sense of smell and taste were gone, so I didn't feel as nauseous. Not that it would matter much since there was nothing left to expel anyway.

The retching finally subsided. Saliva dangled from my protruding tongue.

Catching my breath, I stood up.

– Drip…

Standing in front of the sink, I cautiously turned the faucet.

After confirming the water was at a suitable temperature, I rinsed my mouth.

I intended to just wipe my face with a towel and leave, but I realized my entire body was drenched in cold sweat.

My pajamas were so soaked that they were practically transparent.

I reluctantly took a shower.

In my observation range, the sun was driving away the darkness and illuminating the grounds of Shio-ram.

Saturday morning.

Today was the day we were supposed to gather at Baek Ahrin's dorm to study.

I had been studying all day, even yesterday, the day before, and the day before that.

'Damn… '

I didn't get any sleep last night. To be precise, I dozed off briefly… just a moment ago.

In that brief moment, I had a nightmare.

I dreamed of being eaten alive by an Aerulus.

The spear I barely managed to use missed, and of course, Midday Sun missed too. In that state, my upper body was chewed off.

Adding to that, the phantom pain of my missing left arm came back… and my mouth opened.

Thanks to the necklace, I had forgotten about the Curse of Silence, but it activated.

I had fallen asleep at my desk and rolled around on the floor as if having a seizure.

It was a very noisy morning.

Frowning, I roughly dried my hair with magic and cleaned up the messy room.

I opened the closet in one corner of the room.

There was no need to rummage around. I pulled out a suitable set of casual clothes from the few I had and put them on.

I was about to put on the wings of the sky, but they were already floating behind me.

Normally, for convenience, I wear them draped like a cloak or worn like outerwear.

But if I don't focus on their form, they become long strips of cloth floating behind me.

Sometimes they even wrap around my arm on their own.

They were like that when I first received them. Despite having a shape-changing function, that seemed to be their default state.

Wings of the Sky. Honestly, I accepted them without much thought, mainly because I didn't have high expectations.

Defying my low expectations, the Wings of the Sky saved my life several times. If not for them, I would have been torn to shreds long ago.

They especially proved their worth in Shipnaha.

They helped manage minor monsters and blocked the small wounds that occurred in the process.

When I was first struck by Aerulus, if not for the Wings of the Sky, my upper body would have burst open.

In the subsequent fierce battles, they saved my life several times. In mindless brawls, if they hadn't wrapped around my arm, it would have been torn off.

Despite being an Artifact not highly regarded due to its strict reliance on the purity of magic, it boasted excellent performance, perhaps due to its compatibility with me.

Unlike a certain necklace, it was easy to manipulate. It could be freely used for both offense and defense, and its portability was excellent since it could be worn casually.

'This was a good choice.'

It was one of the best choices I made since coming to this world.

I had briefly thought it might be a good fit due to my high magic purity, but the results exceeded my expectations.

I was very satisfied.

Not all choices were satisfactory.

Especially this one within my observation range.

Frowning, I tapped the Wish Egg placed on the corner of the sofa. The giant egg, about the size of my torso, remained motionless despite the external signal.

'When will this hatch?'

If my memory serves, it usually hatches within a week after the afterparty.

Even in the slowest scenario, it hatched within two weeks in the eleventh run.

But now, nearly a month has passed without any signs.

A tiny suspicion arose that I might have been scammed.

Though placed inside the Tower of Growth, making such a possibility almost null… the anxiety was inevitable.

I went through a lot to get it.

…Honestly, with the help of others, it wasn't too hard, but I had saved up points to pay for it.

'Can't it hatch already?'

I tapped the Wish Egg with a tiny hope.

There was no response.

– Should we fry it a little? What do you think, Hayul? Huh?

Hong Yeon-hwa's comment suddenly came to mind.

– Right, don't you think it would be delicious if we cooked it?

Elia's reply, chiming in beside her, followed.

'……'

I discreetly used the power of observation to check inside. The inside was filled with some strange liquid and dense magic.

There was a small impulse, but I couldn't actually cook it.

I sighed deeply and stood up.

It was almost time to leave.

.

.

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The designated place for our group study was not a library or a study room but Baek Ahrin's dormitory… specifically, the mansion she received as the top student.

The library and other places were fine, but it was more comfortable to study in one's own dorm.

The participants were me, Elia, and Baek Ahrin.

Baek Ahrin had asked Hong Yeon-hwa, but she had to go out for some work over the weekend.

'……'

The thought of Hong Yeon-hwa caused my cheeks to puff out involuntarily.

Last Monday. I was greatly shocked when Hong Yeon-hwa suddenly started avoiding me.

Eventually, she blushed, and her blatant avoidance, even leaving the room, doubled my shock.

Had I done something wrong? Was she very upset? I couldn't remember doing anything wrong, and that made me even more anxious and crazy.

Had she really lost her affection for me?

I spent two days alone in the dorm, searching for reasons and on the verge of tears.

Only then did Hong Yeon-hwa finally approach and apologize.

While it relieved me, she didn't give a proper answer when I asked why and just mumbled.

I knew Hong Yeon-hwa's apology was sincere.

But… I couldn't help feeling a bit miffed that she brushed off the reason.

If I did something wrong, she should point it out so I can fix it, right?

If something was bothering her, I'd try my best to change it…

Anyway, the purpose of the gathering was to prepare for the midterm theory exams by studying together.

If there was something we didn't know, we'd ask, and if none of us knew, we'd put our heads together and figure it out…

Collective intelligence. It's more efficient to solve problems together than alone.

[Why is this the answer for question 42 in category B?]

"Hayul, for question 42 in category B, the magic concentration is above level 3 with a random wave pattern, so you need to use the dispersion formula instead of the alignment formula."

[Ah]

…

[Why is question 3 in category D marked as pending?]

"Ah, for this part… if you look at the wave value for number 2, it temporarily exceeds 10,000, right? From then on, it's treated as a level 2 dungeon, so the strategy rights go to the higher clan, but this part has to be considered along

with the emergency clause at the time…”

…

[For this—]

“Question 42 in category D. Considering the average wave value of 3,500 in the level 3 dungeon ‘Treyl’s Ravine’ with the following personnel… you need to consider this part—”

By putting our heads together, we could derive more diverse and accurate values.

But the level of those heads needed to be somewhat similar.

Baek Ahrin. The top student with perfect scores in all theory subjects.

Elia. I didn’t know this, but she had incredibly high scores in theory as well. She was one of the top students in class Ipchun.

Lee Hayul… My level would be faster to measure from the bottom.

In other words, I wasn’t qualified to study with them.

The ‘let’s study together’ session turned into an ‘Lee Hayul care party’ within less than 30 minutes of starting.

In Baek Ahrin’s dorm, in a separate study room, we sat around the same table to study.

At first, we maintained a reasonable distance.

But as I started asking questions one by one, they both ended up sitting beside me, giving me focused care.

Honestly, I had expected this, but seeing the countless incorrect marks on my worksheet, my already low confidence plummeted.

“Has it been about two months since Hayul started studying?”

During the break, after several hours of non-stop studying.

While Baek Ahrin stepped out for a moment, Elia, noticing my exhausted state with my head on the table, asked as if she just remembered.

[Yes]

[Almost two months]

Although I couldn’t study for about three weeks due to a state of mental distress.

Elia’s eyes widened in surprise at my answer.

“Two months… You’ve come so far in such a short time.”

[Really?]

For that, there seemed to be too many incorrect marks on my worksheet…

Seeing my face, Elia seemed to understand my thoughts and shook her head.

Her gaze swept over my worksheet.

Unlike me, focusing on the incorrect marks, Elia was looking at the correct marks.

I had gotten most of the memorization questions right and had even gotten a few application questions right.

“You’ve worked hard.”

Elia also glanced at the scribbles below the correct marks, where I had tried to solve the problems before asking.

Seeing that, Elia patted my head with a kind smile.

Her touch was filled with kindness, and her words were affirming my efforts.

Elia had been considerate and kind since our first meeting.

But after I saved her brother in Shipnaha, her kindness towards me amplified.

To the point where I felt she would accept even my most childish whims.

Trying to organize my silly thoughts, I stopped my lips from curling into a grin.

Although I wasn't satisfied with my results, receiving Elia's praise made me feel somewhat accomplished.

The ends of the Wings of the Sky, draped like a cloak, gently swayed.

[Happy]

[Keep petting me, please]

I quickly controlled the necklace. Fortunately, I was mindful, and no strange or embarrassing words came out.

– Click

"Tada! Attention! I brought some snacks!"

A moment later, Baek Ahrin entered the study room, placing a tray she was holding onto the table.

The tray was neatly filled with various snacks.

Seeing this, Elia clapped her hands, though with a peculiar expression.

"I've thought this for a while, but Ahrin, you have very specific tastes."

Elia picked up a snack. It was a yakgwa, reflecting a delicious brown color in

the light.

There were many traditional snacks. Of course, there were other snacks too, but the traditional ones were quite prominent.

“Why? What’s wrong? Are you looking down on yakgwa?”

“Ahrin, you like red ginseng candy too, right?”

“What’s wrong with red ginseng candy? People eat according to their tastes.”

Elia’s playful words made Baek Ahrin grumble. Knowing it was all in good fun, they teased each other lightly.

Baek Ahrin had a preference for old-fashioned things. It was information I had from the original work.

“Ah, wait a moment.”

While they were chatting, Elia checked her smartwatch and left the study room.

This was bad news for me.

– Click, the door closed.

In the enclosed, isolated space, only Baek Ahrin and I remained.

“Ugh…”

As I swallowed nervously, Baek Ahrin stretched her arms above her head.

– Crack- Her joints realigned, and a sigh of pleasure escaped her tightly closed lips.

As she straightened her back, her chest naturally stood out prominently.

Already large, her chest swelled even more as she took a deep breath.

That had been bothering me. Both Baek Ahrin and Elia had similar sizes, and avoiding them when they came close from both sides was a struggle.

"……"

I had already turned off the confession necklace.

Having made a mistake once, even if I left it on, the same thing wouldn't happen again, but it was a precaution.

I tried to divert my attention from the observed information and reached for the pile of snacks on the tray.

'Ah.'

I couldn't reach it. My hand flailed in the air pitifully.

…It wasn't my fault. The tray was placed too far to the side, beyond my arm's reach.

I was too lazy to get up. So just as I was about to use the Wings of the Sky to retrieve it, a pale hand picked up the yakgwa I was aiming for.

"Here, is this what you wanted?"

[Thank you]

As I reached out to accept it, the yakgwa moved away.

[?]

Seeing my confused expression, Baek Ahrin shook her head, tapped her lips, and then offered the yakgwa again.

"……"

I understood the gesture, though I didn't want to comply.

But if I refused, the already awkward atmosphere would become even more uncomfortable.

Baek Ahrin wouldn't torment me over it, but… hmm…

After a brief hesitation, I cautiously opened my mouth.

The yakgwa, which looked delicious even through observation, landed on my tongue.

It had no taste.

'…Big.'

And it was larger than I thought.

It filled my mouth quite a bit. I should have eaten it in smaller bites.

But I couldn't spit it out now that it was in my mouth.

I had no choice but to chew.

* * *

'He ate it all in one go.'

Lee Hayul's cheeks puffed up. Despite his small mouth, he had taken the whole yakgwa in one bite.

He looked like a squirrel with its mouth full of acorns.

Supporting her chin with her hand, Baek Ahrin continually watched Lee Hayul's puffed cheeks as he chewed.

She hadn't expected him to take the whole thing in one go.

Though she had given it to him, he could have taken a bite and held the rest in hand.

Realizing this later, Lee Hayul blushed slightly and turned his head away, avoiding her gaze.

'He doesn't avoid this much contact anymore?'

Except when drunk, he had always kept his distance.

His wariness had clearly lessened.

Sensing this, Baek Ahrin smiled a peculiar smile.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Favorability]

Lee Hayul → Elia Slade

●●●●●●●○○○ (71▷73/100)

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Chick]

…

Lee Hayul → Baek Ahrin

●●●●●○○○○○ (53▷55/100)

[Affection] [Curiosity] [Confusion]

…

Lee Hayul → Hong Yeon-hwa

●●●●●●●●○○ (84/100)

[?] [Sense of Debt] [Gratitude] [Pouting]

…

[Conditions to lift the [Curse of Silence] have not been met]

[Conditions to lift the [Curse of Loneliness] have not been met]

CHAPTER 103
STUDYING (3)

Elia, who had stepped out, returned, and the study session resumed.

The ‘Lee Hayul Care Party’ system remained, but I wasn’t too disheartened.

That’s because results started to show.

The number of incorrect marks on my worksheet decreased, and the number of correct marks gradually increased.

“It’s fascinating to see you improving in real-time.”

It wasn’t just my imagination; the statistics showed it. Even Baek Ahrin, who was grading, was amazed, her eyes wide with surprise.

It wasn’t because my memorization had improved. I had already solved most of the memorization-related questions.

Back in my original world, while my body was frail, at least my memory… my memorization skills were something I could somewhat boast about.

The ones turning into correct answers now were all application questions.

The ones where I felt confident but ended up making errors like a burst kimbap side started making sense gradually.

‘Is this also the effect of the [Jack of All Trades]?’

I didn’t know if it had a significant effect on intelligence, but it seemed to provide some proficiency adjustments.

Since realizing that the [Jack of All Trades] was my unique ability, my

efficiency had improved in many ways.

And now I understood why people chose to study in places like study cafes instead of at home.

Studying with others somehow… provided better motivation. The increase in enthusiasm and concentration led to an improvement in learning efficiency.

Of course, my motivation wasn't solely from that.

"Hayul, you got question 21 right too? That was a tough one. Your explanation was… well done."

Elia, who was grading, was amazed again, and she gently patted my head with a soft smile.

"Well done~"

A warm touch flowed down my hair. That touch made me feel like I would helplessly smile.

In fact, more than the competitive spirit from studying with others, the praise and pats I received for each problem I solved motivated me.

They say praise can make even a whale dance. Although it wasn't something particularly praiseworthy, I couldn't deny that it felt good.

"Hayul? Ah~"

[I'm full]

Along with the praise, sometimes… no, quite regularly, snacks or candies were fed to me.

Seeing Baek Ahrin forcibly put snacks into my mouth, Elia joined in, increasing the frequency.

Even though there was no taste, I still accepted it to avoid embarrassment, but after a few times, my stomach felt bloated.

And perhaps because I had vomited a lot in the morning, my already low appetite hit rock bottom, and I didn't want to put anything in my mouth.

I couldn't even bring myself to reach for the nutrition bars I always had.

"Superhumans must eat much more than normal people. Hayul, you eat so little that it's concerning."

Hearing Elia's words as she forced a snack into my mouth, I couldn't help feeling a bit unfair.

Honestly, wasn't it strange to have an appetite in my situation?

I hadn't lived a life where I could eat a lot, so naturally, my appetite shrank.

Recently, with my sense of taste and smell both damaged, and the mental stress I was under, my already low appetite decreased even further.

"You need to eat a lot to be healthy and grow taller…"

'?'

As I held onto that unfairness, Elia's words, which were hard to ignore, slipped out.

My eyelids twitched in shock. I gripped the pen tightly.

[Height has little to do with eating]

"Uh, um…?"

[Genetics play the most important role in height]

Elia, unusually flustered, hesitated.

No matter how kind Elia was, letting that comment slide was difficult.

Eating a lot makes you grow taller. Supplying the body with nutrients and consuming vitamins and iron helps bones grow.

Who doesn't know that? Of course, eating a lot makes you grow taller.

But not everyone is like that. Some people don't grow tall no matter how well they eat.

I wasn't someone who ate and grew well, but I did force myself to eat when I wanted to grow taller later.

I didn't grow at all. No matter how much I ate delicious food, drank milk daily, and regularly consumed meals, my height didn't budge.

If everyone grew tall just by eating well, people who ate three balanced meals and slept well would be giants.

I knew there were logical flaws. But emotionally… indescribable unfairness and inferiority surged.

Elia was tall. She easily surpassed the average height of women I knew.

I was short. I knew I didn't reach the average height for men.

If I opened my eyes, I'd have to look up to make eye contact.

And it wasn't just Elia. Hong Yeon-hwa, Baek Ahrin… Master and Professor Liana were all tall.

Superhumans, in general, had good physiques.

They were tall and muscular. The male students passing by were all tall and muscular, exuding an overwhelming presence.

Unlike me.

A sense of rebellion surged. The confession necklace, sensing its master's intent, clattered and voiced out.

[Height is mostly determined by genetics, no matter how well you consume nutrients, some people still don't grow tall. My height is like this because of my innate genes—]

"Yes, yes, calm down. Hayul, you're right. Let's just calm down a bit, okay?"

"…Yes! I misspoke, didn't I? Ah, Hayul! Try drinking this. It's lemon-flavored and has a strong freshness, so it's not a repulsive taste… good, that's a good boy…"

I was suppressed with hugs and pats.

In the face of power, the helpless truth was trampled mercilessly.

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"Shall we call it a day?"

After being suppressed, it had been a while since I refocused on studying.

During that time, Baek Ahrin, scribbling with a pen, glanced out the window and spoke.

The scenery outside the curtainless window showed the sun setting, spreading a soft orange hue like paint.

"It's already this late."

Seeing the sunset filtering into the room, Elia nodded in agreement. It seemed she hadn't noticed the time passing while focusing.

I, knowing the time through the power of observation, put down my pen and nodded as well.

It wasn't right to stay at someone else's house all night studying.

We had already been treated to meals and plenty of snacks.

Elia and I started to pack our things and stood up. Of course, the only things we had were a hologram projector and a pad.

"Thank you for today! And let's do well tomorrow too?"

[Thank you]

"Yes, yes, don't be late tomorrow. But the snacks might be similar to today's."

"Ahrin's taste is really consistent."

After brief goodbyes, we left the study room. I had packed everything and double-checked to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything.

'I should stop by the training room.'

My body had long recovered. Most of the aftereffects were gone, and my body's performance had even improved.

Although I was told to focus on recovering my stamina for my arm's regeneration… I was still contemplating this part.

'Two weeks left?'

The midterms were approaching. Although it was two weeks away, today was Saturday, so it was practically next week.

It felt like it was just around the corner.

Simultaneously, memories of the Tower entry, where I couldn't prepare properly due to an unexpected situation, resurfaced.

The incident where I foolishly took a potion and passed out on the spot.

I vividly remembered losing the entire weekend before the Tower entry…

‘I need to manage my condition too.’

To avoid a repeat of that disaster, I needed to manage my condition.

However, due to severe nightmares, my already meager sleep of one or two hours a day had vanished.

I could endure for about five days, and since I was living my daily life, it wasn’t a big issue… but it would negatively impact my midterm scores.

Especially for the combat major practical and the tournament.

‘Should I take the medicine today?’

The medicine prescribed at the association’s main healing room.

It was similar to psychiatric medication and was prescribed to be taken if my daily life was affected.

I had taken one before and slept well. I slept for a long time and the nightmares were relatively bearable.

…Though sleeping in Master’s or Hong Yeon-hwa’s embrace was much more effective than the medicine.

Of course, that didn’t mean I could avoid taking the medicine and beg either of them to let me sleep with them.

[I’ll see you tomorrow]

“Oh, wait a moment.”

Just as I bowed my head and turned around, Baek Ahrin, who was waving her hand, suddenly tapped me on the shoulder.

Wondering what it was, I turned halfway, and Baek Ahrin's finger brushed my lips.

"You should clean up after eating."

'?'

Baek Ahrin showed me her finger with a playful smile.

There were crumbs on her fingertip.

The finger that had just brushed my lips.

'……'

I was sure I had wiped it. Why were there crumbs…

First came a sense of injustice, followed by embarrassment.

[You could have just told me]

"Why bother when I can just wipe it off like this?"

Baek Ahrin giggled and waved her hand.

I belatedly wiped my lips with a handkerchief and fled the room.

"Hayul~ Shall we go together~?"

Elia, also giggling, followed behind.

* * *

– Click, the door closed, and silence fell in the room.

The room where the three of us had been studying together.

It was still quiet due to the nature of studying, but now an added sense of

emptiness lingered.

“Hmm…”

Baek Ahrin wiggled her fingers, briefly lost in a strange thought, recalling the recent memory.

While doing so, she noticed the crumbs on her finger.

The crumbs she had just wiped from Lee Hayul’s lips.

Lee Hayul was right to be embarrassed.

These were the snacks given towards the end of the study session, so he might have forgotten to wipe them off.

Baek Ahrin recalled that moment.

– Just take a bite.

– [Thank you]

The snack she had offered, small enough to fit in one bite, which Lee Hayul accepted without hesitation.

It was fascinating how even that filled his mouth.

Anyway.

– How is it? Sweet, right?

Staring at her finger, Baek Ahrin brought it to her lips.

She extended her tongue and licked the crumbs off her fingertip.

There might have been saliva, but Baek Ahrin didn’t mind.

– [Yes]

– [It’s sweet]

Lee Hayul had accepted her snack without any issue and replied that it was sweet.

His innocent expression held no suspicion, and there was no lie in his answer.

Even though it was just crumbs, Baek Ahrin nodded, savoring the taste that lingered on her tongue.

“Ugh, bitter.”

The sweetness was a lie.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Favorability]

Lee Hayul → Baek Ahrin

●●●●●○○○○○ (55▷56/100)

[Affection] [Curiosity] [Confusion]

…

[The unique ability [Jack of All Trades] is growing]

CHAPTER 104
LOVE COUNSELING? (1)

Hong Yeon-hwa looked around with a renewed gaze.

The long hallway adorned with a bright red carpet.

Countless doors on either side, and art pieces like ceramics or paintings.

Beyond the windows, a landscape that could hardly be called a garden and looked more like a forest or field.

Grand buildings constructed beyond the park.

The architectural style and the greetings filled with respect, courtesy, and familiarity from the servants while crossing the hallway.

The main house of the Gop-hwa family.

This was where Hong Yeon-hwa had spent most of her life.

She was born here, and for the sake of controlling Gop-hwa, she always stayed in the heavily protected core of the main house.

Even after she began her external activities, she mostly stayed at the main house.

It was a place she had practically spent her entire life in.

Looking at it, Hong Yeon-hwa felt familiar, yet there was also a peculiar emotion.

If she had to describe it, it might be called a sense of nostalgia.

Even though it was only a few months, the time spent at Shio-ram was incredibly dense.

The time spent at the main house wasn't shallow either, but the recent memories were too intense.

The emotional surges she felt recently were far deeper than those she had received while spending time at the main house.

Especially recently… she felt emotions too overwhelming to handle.

"Ah."

Hong Yeon-hwa, lost in thought while crossing the hallway, suddenly exclaimed. She turned her head and asked Ariel, who was following her.

"Where is Mother?"

"She's handling her morning schedule in the office."

"Just to check, is it okay to go right now?"

"Yes, I anticipated this, so I informed her beforehand."

"Thank you."

Returning after a long time, she had forgotten. Thankfully, Ariel's foresight saved her from a hassle.

She walked upstairs for a while.

When she saw a fancy door.

Ariel, who had been quietly following a few steps behind, moved forward.

After checking her attire, Ariel knocked on the door in front of her.

– Knock knock.

“Madam, the young lady has arrived.”

– Oh, come in.

The response came almost immediately. Ariel grabbed the door handle.

Ariel opened the door without making a single noise and stood beside it, bowing.

“……”

As always, thinking how troublesome it was, Hong Yeon-hwa stepped inside.

As soon as she entered, Hong Yeon-hwa’s eyes fell upon a desk made of old wood… and the white mountain piled on top of it.

It was a wrong expression. Hong Yeon-hwa blinked.

It wasn’t a white mountain but a heap of documents, and it was more accurate to say it was a mountain range of documents rather than a single mountain.

Amidst the mountain range of documents, a woman looked up like a stranded hiker.

Her black bobbed hair, swept back, tumbled down, and her deep brown eyes emitted a dull light.

“…You’re here? It’s hard to see my daughter’s face.”

Choi Jiyeon.

The current head’s wife, and the family’s general manager.

Also, Hong Yeon-hwa’s mother.

“…What is all this?”

Reuniting with her family after a long time, Hong Yeon-hwa opened her mouth with a face that held more reluctance than joy.

The joy of meeting her parent was significant, but the mountain range of documents and her mother's haggard face drew more attention.

"What else? It's this damned workload."

In response to the reluctant reaction, Choi Jiyeon pressed her temples. The distinct shadows under her eyes indirectly highlighted her exhaustion.

Hong Yeon-hwa could see it clearly. She contemplated whether to immediately lay her mother down on a cot.

"Weren't there fewer tasks originally? And what's with the paper? Weren't all documents stored as holographic data?"

"When work piles up, this is how it stacks up… And many documents are still used in paper form for security reasons…"

The tone of her explanation was filled with fatigue.

As Hong Yeon-hwa's contemplation leaned more towards the cot, Choi Jiyeon suddenly furrowed her brows and stared directly at Hong Yeon-hwa.

"More importantly, didn't I explain all this to you? Personally, several times?"

Hong Yeon-hwa was the heir to the Gop-hwa family.

She was to lead a force renowned worldwide. Naturally, she had learned various disciplines and received comprehensive education necessary for running the family.

Choi Jiyeon, who was practically running the family, had personally taught her.

"How am I supposed to remember all that? Just studying theory at Shio-ram

is making my head split…”

The result of her personal teaching was right before her eyes.

The future leader of the Gop-hwa family scratching her head and saying, “How am I supposed to remember all that?” made Choi Jiyeon’s heart sink.

The current head… Choi Jiyeon’s husband was similar.

He often fled from paperwork, claiming to hate it. The tasks he had no choice but to do were slow and lacking, forcing Choi Jiyeon to assist.

Naturally, the burden fell on Choi Jiyeon, the general manager. No matter how she delegated tasks to others, important matters and final decisions always landed on her…

So, at least for her child… She personally taught Hong Yeon-hwa with the hope that she wouldn’t trouble the next general manager. The result was disappointing.

“Next general manager? If you keep extending your term—”

“You crazy girl! Just kill your mother, kill her!”

“Why the sudden swearing?”

“How can I not swear when you say you’ll keep making your already suffering mother work to death?”

Choi Jiyeon, who had been swearing in shock, grabbed the back of her neck. The tingling sensation was annoying.

Recently, her once vigorous superhuman body seemed to be deteriorating…

“Haa… Sit down.”

At Choi Jiyeon’s words, as she rubbed her neck, Hong Yeon-hwa promptly sat

on the guest sofa.

While Ariel, who had been waiting, brought out tea, Choi Jiyeon, having composed herself, also sat on the opposite sofa.

Comfort. The moment Choi Jiyeon sank into the sofa, that was the feeling she felt.

Strictly speaking, the quality of her office chair was better, but the fact that the mountain of documents wasn't in her direct line of sight provided mental comfort…

"So, why has my daughter come today?"

"Didn't you get notified?"

"I did receive the notification! But I'm just reiterating to ensure there's no mistake in the communication…"

Instead, the precious sight of Hong Yeon-hwa came into view.

A face often compared to beautiful flames and radiant rubies.

In some aspects, she was a pretty and gentle daughter, but in others… not so much.

Choi Jiyeon took a sip of the warm tea Ariel had brought and spoke.

"You mentioned bringing your crush over during the vacation. That's quite a quick progression."

"Why is the story shortened like that?"

Hong Yeon-hwa crumpled her face in disbelief. Her reaction wasn't as sharp as before. Had she grown accustomed to the term 'crush'?

Choi Jiyeon regretfully took another sip of tea. The fine aroma of the tea

leaves filled her nose. Her throbbing headache eased slightly.

“So… should I address him as a member of the family?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out by bringing him.”

Recalling the message from Hong Yeon-hwa, her headache returned.

Lee Hayul.

An unprecedented special admissions student.

The young hero of Shipnaha.

The rare crush her daughter treasured and defended fiercely.

And, the owner of Gop-hwa…

‘……’

She swallowed the sigh that wanted to escape.

Of the documents piled on that cursed desk, over 20% were reports on Lee Hayul.

Choi Jiyeon, who had been rubbing her eyes, lifted her head. She saw Hong Yeon-hwa, who seemed somewhat tense.

It seemed Hong Yeon-hwa also understood how significant the issue was.

“To put it simply, we couldn’t find any of Lee Hayul’s family.”

“Even you couldn’t find them?”

Hong Yeon-hwa’s eyes widened.

Seeing her surprise, Choi Jiyeon made a complicated expression.

Should she be pleased with her daughter's faith in her ability to find information?

Or should she be sad that her daughter thought of her as an information-finding machine…

"I've been looking since I got the notice. I've sent out separate investigators… I've tracked every lead possible, but there's absolutely no trace."

Lee Hayul's record began at the entrance of an orphanage.

The orphanage director's statement began with finding an infant, without even a simple bundle or wrapping cloth, abandoned on the ground and not crying.

Before that? There wasn't a trace. It was a complete blank. No matter how thoroughly they searched, they couldn't find anything.

At that point, even with any type of comparative test, it didn't seem like his parents would be identified.

It could be that he was never registered in any database… It was doubtful that an unregistered individual could be a member of the Gop-hwa family.

Hong Yeon-hwa's face fell into contemplation at Choi Jiyeon's words. It must have felt puzzling and strange.

Choi Jiyeon felt the same but couldn't find out more.

Even if Lee Hayul himself came to cooperate, she intuitively felt there wouldn't be much progress.

"But more importantly."

So she pushed aside that question. It was foolish to fret over something unsolvable.

It was the post-cataclysm world.

Even though basic common sense was established by now, who could predict when something beyond common sense would occur?

The cataclysmic events.

The emergence of magic and monsters.

Who would have predicted that a tower would descend from the sky into the depths of the African wilderness?

“So, how’s my daughter’s love life going?”

Therefore, Choi Jiyeon brought up a discussable topic.

She didn’t know if Lee Hayul was really Hong Hayul.

But she knew Lee Hayul could potentially become Hong Hayul.

“What the… No! What are you talking about?”

The reaction was immediate. Hong Yeon-hwa, eyes wide, opened her mouth in surprise.

“Oh my, look at you flustered. Something happened, didn’t it?”

“Something? What? What do you mean? There’s nothing. Don’t accuse me falsely.”

“It seems the young lady has done something to earn Lee Hayul’s slight displeasure.”

“Hey!”

Hong Yeon-hwa shouted at Ariel’s small remark from the side.

“Tut tut… I knew it.”

“What’s with that reaction? So annoying…”

Despite Hong Yeon-hwa’s gnashing, Choi Jiyeon clicked her tongue. She had suspected, given her daughter’s lack of tact, that she had made some mistake.

“What mistake did you make? Tell your mother everything.”

“What do you mean tell everything…”

“Isn’t that why counselors exist? Sometimes discussing and sharing thoughts can lead to good answers.”

“Indeed, young lady. It can be helpful to share rather than to worry alone.”

At Choi Jiyeon’s urging look, Ariel joined the conversation.

“Well, it’s just…”

Facing pressure from both sides, Hong Yeon-hwa’s defenses weakened.

No matter how prickly she acted, they were her parents and her long-time guardian and friend.

Moreover, as someone with no experience in relationships, her ears naturally perked up.

As expected, Hong Yeon-hwa’s eyes wandered before her mouth slowly opened.

“Hayul greeted me… but I ran away.”

“What a rotten girl.”

“……”

Immediately following her words, she faced a curse from the front and a gaze filled with pity from behind.

Hong Yeon-hwa's shoulders shrunk unbecomingly.

"…Why did you do that?"

Choi Jiyeon, slapping her forehead, urged her to continue.

"……"

Hong Yeon-hwa's mouth clamped shut. Her defense, already quite thick, became even thicker. Choi Jiyeon's eyes narrowed.

There seemed to be a reason behind it.

Choi Jiyeon patiently waited for Hong Yeon-hwa to continue.

Keeping faith, Hong Yeon-hwa's mouth opened.

"…Because I might have."

"Even superhumans can't understand if you talk like an ant."

"…Because I might have attacked him…"

Why was she dragging it out like this? With slight irritation and much curiosity, Choi Jiyeon stared at Hong Yeon-hwa's lips.

Ariel, standing behind the sofa, also perked up her ears.

They say other people's love stories are more interesting. It was true. Especially when it was about Hong Yeon-hwa, whose temperament was so harsh that there were worries she'd remain single for life.

With both Choi Jiyeon and Ariel focusing intently, making the faintest sound audible, Hong Yeon-hwa, blushing, muttered with her head down.

"…Because I thought I might pounce on him…"

"?"

“?”

Did they hear her wrong?

CHAPTER 105
LOVE COUNSELING? (2)

The impulse on the brink of overflowing was experienced just this week.

It was the first day of the spirit magic class that had been crammed into a single week for some reason.

Hong Yeon-hwa was sitting listlessly, fiddling with a crystal ball.

She had already confirmed that her affinity with spirits was practically nonexistent.

The only slight affinity she had was with a fire spirit. Even that wasn't significant.

Moreover, it had only been a couple of months since the last detailed aptitude test. The possibility of any special aptitude developing in that time was virtually nil, hence her indifference.

Without any expectations, she was casually chatting with Baek Ahrin and other friends while doing some mana training.

Suddenly, a part of her vision sparkled.

"What?"

A blue glow flickered, followed by yellow and light green. It didn't stop there; red and brown were also added.

The sudden change in her vision, and the presence that felt similar yet different from mana and elemental force.

It was the presence of spirits. Despite her poor affinity, it wasn't impossible

to sense spirits that revealed themselves to the world.

Turning her head out of curiosity, she thought it was probably the professor summoning a spirit.

And then…

"…Oh…"

Her thoughts came to a halt.

The sight before her felt surreal.

A clear blue lake, untouched by impurities, and a soft white mist spread across the surrounding grass.

The vast sky extending beyond the horizon, and the procession of clouds hanging below it.

The blue hues of the earth and sky.

At the center of these hues was Lee Hayul, bathed in five different colors.

Spirits were perching and floating around his shoulders, arms, and head as he sat with his back to the lake and sky.

Each time, one color would deepen and fade, then another would deepen and fade…

It was like a game of colors, the soft light enhancing his already captivating features.

A petite figure perfect for hugging tightly.

Lovely black hair, particularly fragrant and sweet.

Neat eyelashes and gentle, puppy-like eyes.

Dark circles beneath his eyes evoked a sense of frailty, further amplified by his feebly fluttering sleeve.

Additionally, a blue cloth fluttered behind him, reminiscent of a celestial maiden's robe from a fairy tale, creating a dreamy atmosphere.

In this picturesque setting.

The gaze of nearly a hundred people was entirely focused on one person. It was impossible to look away from the atmosphere surrounding him.

It didn't matter if they were male or female. Personal aesthetic preferences didn't matter.

Beauty.

Only that word remained imprinted in their minds.

Whether he knew about the many gazes directed at him or not, Lee Hayul, who was tilting his head absentmindedly, suddenly raised his hand wrapped in an arm sleeve.

The black arm sleeve that covered from his fingers to nearly half his forearm contrasted sharply with his pale white skin.

And then, a red light cluster settled on his fingertip.

A fire spirit.

Fire is an essential element for human survival, yet it's also a dangerous element that can easily take lives.

The fire spirit, which had fire as its origin and essence, wasn't a threat but rather rubbed its body affectionately against the arm it had perched on.

Perhaps realizing the spirit's affectionate gesture, the once dazed Lee Hayul smiled softly and gently petted the spirit.

"……"

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes, which had been staring absentmindedly, twitched. Her slightly open mouth looked like it might drool at any moment.

– Fwoosh…

The internal Gop-hwa flickered. It wasn't a new occurrence. As long as her life continued, so would the Gop-hwa's flames.

– Fwoosh…

But it was different this time.

The usual Gop-hwa was intense enough to be threatening just by sight. When fueled by intense emotions, it was fierce and dangerous enough to burn everything around.

The Gop-hwa during the previous hospital visit was… unusually calm and cold.

But now?

It wasn't intense.

It wasn't fierce and threatening.

It wasn't calm and cold.

Now… it flickered sticky and clingy, as if it would engulf anything it came into contact with before setting it ablaze.

A sticky impulse. Or perhaps, a desire.

Gop-hwa… Hong Yeon-hwa wanted to devour.

She wanted to devour what was clearly in her sight.

She wanted to engulf that dream-like beauty, hug it close, and crush it.

Warm, fragrant, soft, squishy, making cute sounds, bringing crumpled candies as rewards with tiny hands, always wagging a tail enticingly, yet innocently tilting its head as if unaware, bringing handmade gifts despite having little time and feeling unwell, and showing up battered and injured from somewhere…

"…It's not my fault. It's all Hayul's fault. I've held back so much. He kept coming close, apologizing, teary-eyed and clingy… He kept… kept…"

"Yes, yes! I get it, you can stop now! It's all clear, so stop!"

The murmuring continued. Though her voice was small, unable to fill the spacious office, the sticky, dark desire it carried was overflowing.

Unable to bear it, Choi Jiyeon intervened, startled, stopping the murmuring.

At first, it was full of the unique embarrassment of being smitten, but at some point, it turned strange…

Feeling that if she let it continue, she would hear something truly inappropriate, she acted, but it seemed a bit too late.

Choi Jiyeon steadied her breath, feeling her face. The skin under her fingers felt chillingly cold.

Choi Jiyeon glanced up. Her eyes met Ariel's, who was waiting behind the sofa.

"……"

Usually stony-faced and still, Ariel's expression now seemed not just cold but pale with dread.

Below her.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been murmuring with a sticky gaze, came back to her senses.

"…Huh? What is it? Why do you look like that? Are you sick?"

Then, as if slowly regaining her senses, she tilted her head in confusion.

It was clear she wasn't even aware of what she had been muttering. That was even more frightening…

'…What should I say… '

The outpouring of emotions was hard to summarize. If she had to trim it down, it was just affection for that boy… well, damn.

Choi Jiyeon shook her head. She decided to think positively.

Despite her thoughts, she didn't act on them. She endured it… didn't force herself onto someone.

Even Hong Yeon-hwa, with the severe side effects of Gop-hwa, somehow overcame those sticky feelings.

Choi Jiyeon decided to think positively about that part.

Isn't it possible for people to have dark thoughts sometimes? As long as it's not acted upon, it's hard to chastise someone for their inner musings.

'…Or should thoughts of forcing oneself be chastised too? And wasn't it just expressed now?'

The more she thought about it, the more her head hurt…

"Hoo…"

Choi Jiyeon let out a deep breath and sipped her tea. The cup, equipped with a heating mechanism, kept the tea warm.

If it had cooled, it might have soothed her. That's a bit regrettable.

Smacking her lips, she put down the teacup and gulped cold water next to it.

The cold water cooled her heated insides as it went down her throat.

Likewise, her dizzy head calmed down a bit.

'…Hmm.'

After thinking calmly, she came up with a good idea.

"…Should I arrange an engagement?"

"…Wh-what, what engagement?"

"Engagement, of course."

While the feelings Hong Yeon-hwa expressed were dark and twisted, they were still feelings.

But if it's within the bonds of marriage, isn't it okay? Judging by the looks, she seemed deeply infatuated, and from what she heard, the boy had some affection too…

Either way, Choi Jiyeon didn't want to see her daughter become a criminal…

* * *

Late at night, after completing both personal training and studies.

Unable to sleep, Baek Ahrin was assisting with the family business piled up like a mountain.

Unlike some, Baek Ahrin had diligently completed and absorbed her heir education.

Until now, she had been handling a significant portion of the family's tasks.

Since entering Shio-ram, she had less time, so she had to let go of some tasks, but she still managed to handle some when she had a bit of free time.

Of course, this was only assisting with appropriate tasks. The really secure tasks were not handled outside the main house.

As she was sorting through the piled-up emails, Baek Ahrin's hand stopped abruptly.

Among the many work emails, there was one from her parents.

"……"

Baek Ahrin stared at it expressionlessly before reluctantly opening the email.

There wasn't much to it.

How was life at Shio-ram, how were her studies, was she managing her unique ability well, was she taking care of herself, etc…

It was the usual questions parents asked their children.

Even setting aside the unique stiffness of the font, the tone itself was still as blunt as ever.

Sending concerns in such a tone was absurd.

Of course, she didn't find it entirely unpleasant.

Baek Ahrin knew well that her parents were poor at expressing emotions. And she knew their concern for her was genuine.

Reading the email expressionlessly, she let out a dry laugh at the cautious mention of engagement near the end.

It wasn't an assertive suggestion but a careful inquiry about meeting someone.

“Engagement…”

Engagement proposals. She had received countless offers since childhood, thanks to her appearance.

She had rejected them all. The Changhae family wasn’t a weak force that could be pressured into such arrangements. Thanks to that, she could reject proposals based on her preferences.

The reason was simple. It wasn’t about liking or disliking someone. Back then, she simply didn’t have the time.

That was still the case.

Baek Ahrin touched her chest. Beyond the heavy flesh, she felt the faint presence of the curse lodged in her heart.

Cold and chilling.

Baek Ahrin’s body, due to possessing Changhae, was specialized in handling water and cold.

Thanks to that, she was accustomed to the cold, but that damn curse’s chilliness was still unbearable.

“……”

Muttering the word ‘engagement,’ Baek Ahrin delved into her memories.

To Baek Ahrin, engagement was a form of transaction.

The sender shows trust by sending their bloodline, and the receiver secures stability by accepting it.

Few methods are safer than using bloodline as both a price and ransom.

Engagement is a transaction. The engaged are the goods.

In that sense, Baek Ahrin was a very valuable good.

Special admission student.

A student with unprecedented potential noticed by the Principal. A virtually guaranteed lottery win.

The Tower of Growth.

Lee Hayul, who displayed a comparable potential to Hong Yeon-hwa's Gop-hwa.

The Shipnaha incident.

The traces of Changhae confirmed on Lee Hayul in the healing room.

"…Hmm."

She made a rough calculation.

A potential candidate who might dissolve the curse, Hong Yeon-hwa.

Lee Hayul, recognized by the Principal for his potential.

Lee Hayul, who exhibited Gop-hwa's potential comparable to Hong Yeon-hwa.

Lee Hayul, who left traces of Changhae on par with Baek Ahrin…

"Tsk…"

The scale tipped.

But ignoring the other side was difficult due to the accumulated affection and burden.

Moreover, she wasn't sure if Lee Hayul would consider her valuable.

Judging by the favorability, the other side seemed dominant, and Lee Hayul appeared to have a strange aversion to her.

"……"

If that's the case.

If she intended to proceed properly, she had to increase her value.

Late at night.

Baek Ahrin's contemplation continued for a long time.

CHAPTER 106
MIDTERM EVALUATION (1)

-Good~ Mo~ rning! Pa-pa-pa…

Early morning. While absentmindedly scribbling with a pen, an old song I hadn't heard in a while filled my ears.

A hologram projector sprawled in one corner of the desk was blaring an alarm, oblivious to its owner's mood.

The lyrics, melody, and tempo of the song were great, but listening to it at such a moment brought a peculiar unease.

As an alarm, though, it was quite effective.

– Pa-pa-pa—

I reached out and tapped the hologram floating in the air.

– Click

The song cut off, and the hologram updated to display the schedule.

[Schedule: Midterm Evaluation Day 1]

[Monday AM: 6:00]

Confirming it with the ability of Observation, a sigh naturally escaped me.

A breath filled with fatigue. My eyes, habitually rubbed, were marked with dark shadows.

The alarm was meant to wake me up, but I was already awake.

To be precise, I hadn't slept.

Master had advised me to get enough sleep for my condition, but honestly, I was afraid of nightmares.

If I slept, I'd have nightmares that would ruin my mood for the day, and I was scared of taking pills too frequently.

The only other way to avoid nightmares was to sleep in someone else's arms… but attempting that while sober was far too embarrassing.

I don't plan to stay up all night throughout the midterms. Before the tournament day, I'll take some medicine and get some sleep.

'Ugh.'

I put down the pen and pushed back the chair as I stood up. My body felt stiff after sitting for about ten hours straight.

I stretched my limbs and cracked my joints.

Bending my legs and then stretching them, doing the same with my arms…

The stiffness and tightness in my body started to ease, giving me a peculiar sense of pleasure.

The stretching movements were somewhat limited because I had only one arm.

It's not just stretching. Living with one arm brings a lot of inconveniences.

It goes without saying in everyday life. Especially in combat, it was a deadly gap.

There was a gap simply because one arm became two, but looking deeper, there were major problems like the overall disruption of my body's balance.

Moreover, it seemed like there was an interaction issue within my body, as the senses I had been fine-tuning went temporarily awry.

Specifically, after being in the same state of over-amplification at the Tower of Growth…

I've regained control now, but at that time, while being petted by Master, I flopped around like a freshly caught fish.

For practical combat training and just before the tournament, I plan to fine-tune my senses with Master's help.

– Bzzz

Since I didn't have much time, I cleaned my body with magic.

Over that, I donned my cadet uniform and covered my scarred hand with an arm sleeve.

…Having one arm made dressing a bit inconvenient.

I had to bite and pull on the clothes, or use the Wings of the Sky to manipulate them.

Thinking about it, the Wings of the Sky was the best choice.

From combat to everyday life, it's useful in every aspect.

'…Compared to that, the Wish Egg… '

That useless thing occupying the sofa…

A sigh escaped me. I didn't expect it to be in that state even on the day of the midterm evaluation…

'Is it really not going to hatch?'

Unless the Principal scammed me…

Come to think of it, the Principal never mentioned anything about it to me. I just assumed it was a hidden piece and picked it up.

When other cadets approached it, there was no reaction, but it opened when I approached… It must have been meant for me…

'Ugh.'

I don't know why I have to agonize over a hidden piece until exam day.

'Please hatch already… '

Wishing for it to hatch soon, I tapped the surface of the Wish Egg, packed the rest of my belongings, and stepped out of the dorm.

The written exams of the midterm evaluation begin on the first day and continue to the second day.

Seeing the packed schedule from early morning till almost evening, I felt a sense of unease.

Moreover, it wasn't just sitting idly during those hours but squeezing my brain to solve as many problems as possible…

'Ugh.'

I couldn't help but shake my head.

I checked the rest of the schedule.

Practical exams for major subjects are scheduled for the morning of the third and fourth days, and the tournament preliminaries and finals are scheduled for the afternoon of the fourth and fifth days, respectively.

For reference, the only day Shio-ram is open to outsiders is the last day, when the tournament finals are held.

Only the tournament finals are broadcasted online, and outsiders come to watch in person.

Today is the first day of the midterm evaluation, a day for written tests.

The evaluation location assigned to me is the fifth evaluation hall, and unfortunately, Hong Yeon-hwa, Elia, Baek Ahrin, and others were assigned to different locations.

The others I have a small acquaintance with are the same.

The fifth evaluation hall building I entered was simply a large auditorium.

The quality was on a different level, but it looked like a giant version of a common auditorium.

– Is this Superhuman Special Law something we'll actually use later?

– They're making us study it, so we probably will…

– The amount we have to memorize is too much… They make us memorize dozens of exception clauses in the law.

– Wow, Spell Composition Studies is really tough… Even if the expected questions come out, I'll probably get half wrong.

– The difficulty of magic is notoriously insane.

– Damn, I'm not even a magic major.

– After all, practicals are the only way to survive.

– What's with giving up even before the written test?

– I appreciate your quick surrender judgment.

While making final preparations at the seat with my name tag, I heard small but various murmurs.

The topic was consistent due to the impending evaluation.

There was also a common thread of tension and worry.

Seeing their anxious and worried looks, it seemed I wasn't the only one feeling uneasy.

Even though the written part has a low weight, that low weight can still affect grades.

For cadets full of academic fervor and competitive spirit, dropping in rank due to poor written scores would be quite unpleasant.

"We will begin the written evaluation shortly. There are 60 questions, and the exam time is 2 hours. Cadets who finish early may leave."

While I was reviewing the last of my notes and meditating, a voice echoed from the ceiling speakers.

The tension, already high, doubled. Around that time, staff started collecting smartwatches and other devices from cadets.

"……"

The staff member approaching from my left naturally reached out, then flinched upon seeing my empty left sleeve.

I handed my hologram projector around my neck to the staff.

[Here you go.]

"…Thank you. You can retrieve your items from the desk after the evaluation."

[Do I need to submit other artifacts as well?]

"…No, that artifact is not required."

[Alright.]

[Thank you.]

The staff expressed gratitude and continued collecting devices from other cadets.

Of course, it was for security.

One might think it lax, but this wasn't the only security measure.

Upon using the abilities of Observation and Space, I felt numerous spells densely arranged like a web.

It was a security measure.

It functioned as a barrier that completely cut off the flow of mana between seats.

If activated, it would also block out any external noise.

Since the spells were crafted by Shio-ram's magic professors and the Mage Council's personnel, the security was tight.

Few cadets could breach it, and they would inevitably be caught in the process.

Such was the magic.

"……"

I was observing the outside of the barrier.

I could see the evaluation hall beyond the barrier and the cadets inside another barrier.

In other words, I could directly observe how other cadets were solving the problems.

It was practically a test of integrity. There was no guarantee that peeking at

others' answers would be correct.

There were over a hundred cadets in the evaluation hall. I could check all of them or just glance at those who seemed to be doing well.

Practically a test of integrity.

Sighing deeply, I limited my Observation ability to my seat.

I had to be confident in myself.

I had to be able to declare that I wasn't a person to be underestimated anywhere, anytime.

So I didn't even consider cheating.

Besides, I wasn't desperate enough to resort to cheating.

"Time has passed. We will now begin the written evaluation."

A voice flowed from the speakers again.

With the declaration of the start, the barrier activated.

– Bzzz…

The tablet left on the desk by the staff powered on, displaying the exam questions.

This subject was magic.

[Question ①]

[Compose the spell for the lowest-tier magic 'Mana Bullet.']

[Reference – Use the spell registered with the Mage Council.]

…

[Question ⑭]

[This spell is a modified composite spell for the low-tier magic ‘Fireball.’]

[Assuming the above spell is cast, answer the following questions.]

[(1) Describe the differences between the original spell and the modified spell.]

[(2) Write down the interpretation and reverse calculation for the modified spell.]

[(3) Compose a counter-spell for the modified spell.]

…

[Question ㊺]

[This spell is an arbitrarily modified mid-high-tier barrier magic ‘Mirror Veil of Artervita.’]

[The above magic cannot be cast normally.]

[Answer the following questions.]

[(1) Describe the cause of the abnormal casting of the spell.]

[(2) Correct the cause of the abnormal casting and write the spell for normal casting.]

“……”

The passages were mentally exhausting.

Remarkably, there were no multiple-choice questions.

The evaluation time was 120 minutes. There were 60 questions.

That meant about 2 minutes could be spent on each question.

…Only 2 minutes per question.

Even the 10 seconds I spent pondering felt wasteful.

I quickly picked up the pen.

* * *

Lee Hayul's dormitory had no special decorations or additional furniture.

The wallpaper, furniture, and product arrangement were all in their original state.

The only thing different from the original was the giant egg on the sofa.

The dormitory was devoid of any signs of life.

An eerie silence filled the air.

– Crack

In that stillness, the sound of something breaking was heard a few hours after Lee Hayul had left.

– Crackle

The giant egg wobbled.

Despite no external force, the egg shook on its own, and small cracks appeared on its surface.

Hatching was imminent.

CHAPTER 107
MIDTERM EVALUATION (2)

“Sigh…”

Elia, who was sitting next to me, let out a rare deep sigh.

She then slumped her body onto the table.

Her warm-looking yellow hair spilled over, and her large chest pressed against the table as another sigh escaped her.

It was an expression filled with fatigue.

It was unusual to see Elia, who was always positive, reacting this way.

But I didn’t think it was odd.

Sipping the overpriced cocoa, I listened to the surrounding noises.

– Oh, damn…

– Seriously, is this for real? The average score plummeted!

– Did anyone solve problem 39 on dungeon strategy?

The café, bathed in the soft light of the setting sun, should have had a pleasant atmosphere, but instead, it was filled with gloomy sounds.

“It was so hard…”

Elia groaned, sighing deeply, seemingly unbothered by her chest being squished against the table.

“Indeed, this exam was quite difficult overall. I also found myself rushing due to lack of time.”

Baek Ahrin, who was sipping coffee at the table opposite us, responded to Elia’s complaint.

Even Baek Ahrin, who had topped the entrance exam, admitted it was difficult.

…But according to the original story, Baek Ahrin would still get perfect scores in both written and practical exams and maintain her top position.

“It wasn’t just overall difficult; it was insane. Some questions were genuinely impossible.”

“If you had studied more regularly, Yeon-hwa… Never mind.”

“What do you mean? Why stop halfway through?”

Hong Yeon-hwa, who was sitting next to her, also had her head down on the table.

It was after the end of the first day of the midterm evaluation.

We had just gathered at the same café to check the tournament preliminary list, which would be announced shortly.

“Basic Magic, Spell Interpretation, Dungeon Mechanics, Dungeon Strategy… Nothing was easy…”

Hong Yeon-hwa muttered, rubbing her head against the table.

I nodded inwardly at her complaint.

The reputation of Shio-ram’s evaluations was well-known.

The level of education was high, and there were many lectures where

keeping up with the pace was tough, and the regular evaluations were indeed challenging.

Moreover, the midterm written exams were notoriously difficult.

While practical exams could be manageable given talent and lifelong effort, the written exams were uniquely hard.

There were no multiple-choice questions.

Most were descriptive, requiring complex procedures. The time was so tight that hesitating and thinking too long would leave no time for the latter questions.

To meet the time limit, one had to write the answers almost simultaneously with the thought process.

Thus, grading took quite some time.

Despite the numerous administrative staff and assistants, even with the aid of magic, it took time. Including the correction period, the duration extended even further.

Thanks to this, professors were said to be extremely busy during midterm evaluations, without even time to dry their wet hair.

Professor Liana, who taught spirit magic to Elia and me, had also complained about being tired from balancing public lectures and midterm preparations.

Moreover, the written evaluations weren't over yet.

Though we had completed more than half of today's written exam schedule, there were still subjects left.

And…

"This time, it was especially hard…"

This midterm written exam was particularly difficult.

I had been desperately catching up with the curriculum since being discharged, consistently solving past papers and reference materials.

The difficulty level had noticeably increased.

“I heard they increased the difficulty considering the high level of this year’s first-year students.”

“Huh?”

“You know how Shio-ram is known for tailoring the difficulty to the student level? I heard they raised the level because this year’s first-year students are considered exceptional.”

“That’s absurd. Why make it harder… My head already hurts enough…”

Hong Yeon-hwa sighed heavily at Baek Ahrin’s reply and rubbed her head against the table again.

Hong Yeon-hwa was a typical practical student who preferred practical exams over written ones.

To be precise, she was smart but chose not to use her brain often.

So even though she complained about doing poorly, her actual scores would be quite high.

If her written scores were truly poor, she wouldn’t be able to hold her position as the second seat.

Some might think of it as deception, but Hong Yeon-hwa, with her head down and shaking side to side, appeared genuine.

Her ruby-colored hair scattered with each head shake.

But Hong Yeon-hwa didn't seem to care.

Neither did Elia, who was leaning her head against the table across from her, nor Baek Ahrin, who was focused on her smartwatch.

"……"

But it bothered me.

Observing through the power of Observation, my fingers twitched subconsciously.

The disheveled hair was really bothering me, in a mildly uncomfortable way.

Of course, even disheveled, Hong Yeon-hwa's hair was beautiful, but it would look better if neat… The tangled state felt slightly uncomfortable.

After a moment of hesitation, I reached out and tidied her hair.

The soft texture wrapping around my fingers was impressive.

Was this what a noble's hair felt like when treated with fragrant oil?

Even though she usually controlled it, the softness felt more pronounced due to its heightened sensitivity.

Come to think of it, Hong Yeon-hwa was already similar to a top-tier noble in status.

Maybe Hong Yeon-hwa also took care of her hair in various ways.

Considering the time and hassle involved, it seemed unlike Hong Yeon-hwa's personality to bother with such things.

"……!"

Hong Yeon-hwa's shoulders suddenly jerked as she rubbed her cheek against the table. Her body trembled as if hit by an earthquake, and then she glanced

at me.

Her red eyes, glistening with moisture, met mine. Seeing the confusion in them, I realized my mistake.

[Oh]

[I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable]

"No! No… It's fine. It wasn't uncomfortable at all."

Just as I was about to retract my hand and apologize.

Hong Yeon-hwa, blinking blankly, shook her head vigorously with her cheek still pressed against the table.

Feeling a bit relieved, I continued to tidy her hair.

[It's really soft]

"…Th-thank you."

Hong Yeon-hwa, rubbing her fingers against the tidied hair, lifted her upper body.

Seeing her hair neatly arranged, more so than usual, brought a small sense of satisfaction.

It would have been better to use the portable comb I usually carried, but it felt a bit off to take it out now.

"……"

"?"

A strange emotion flickered in Hong Yeon-hwa's red eyes. Different from the earlier confusion.

What should I call that? It seemed like an emotion forcibly suppressing a certain impulse.

Curious, I tilted my head, and a scene of a predator before its prey flashed in my mind.

I couldn't understand why such a scene appeared in my head.

– Ding

– Ding, ding, ding!

Just as Hong Yeon-hwa exuded a strange aura, the smartwatches of the cadets in the café chimed simultaneously.

"Ah, the allocation must be out."

Elia, who had her eyes half-closed, suddenly straightened up.

In the process, her chest, which had been pressed down, regained its original size, almost like witnessing a marvel of the human body.

Elia, as well as Baek Ahrin and Hong Yeon-hwa, tapped their smartwatches to check the tournament preliminary list.

– Ding

The hologram projector I was carrying also chimed.

I fiddled with the projector around my neck, and a hologram sprang up.

'Who will I be up against… '

Though I had practical exams from the afternoon of the third day to the morning of the fourth day, if the schedule adhered to the prior notice, it would be a near-certain victory for me.

I wasn't complacent, but I couldn't help but want to focus my efforts on the

tournament.

Especially since this tournament had a tight schedule.

The tournament preliminaries would be held on the afternoon of the fourth day, immediately followed by the finals on the fifth day.

It was quite a demanding schedule. The short breaks between matches were so brief that exerting too much effort in one match could jeopardize the next.

But the cadets had no objections. This structure had been a tradition of Shio-ram since its inception.

In actual combat, it's rare to get the desired rest when desired.

Monsters, enemies, and the environment have no reason to accommodate external conveniences.

Reflecting that, the tournament limited rest between matches, encouraging cadets to manage their stamina… or so it was explained.

'If I get an easy opponent, the match will be easy, but there wouldn't be much to gain… '

Honestly, I didn't think I could win, but I still wanted to rank as high as possible.

The tournament finals are broadcasted externally.

The matches will be widely disseminated through the internet, composed of the power of Harmony.

Additionally, representatives from various forces and clans will likely watch the matches in person.

That adds a bit of pressure.

There’s a small concern about looking disgraceful if I make it to the finals and lose miserably.

I don’t have much pride or care about my reputation, but…

I’m worried about my master’s feelings.

Having overcome the trauma of losing a disciple in the past, my master has accepted me as a disciple.

Moreover, since that day, my master has been diligently training me with great care.

In such a situation, it would be unpleasant if the disciple lost badly.

It’s not about my pride or reputation but my master’s feelings.

So, I don’t plan to settle for a mediocre result.

One way or another, I’ll make it to the finals. And there, I must show a good performance so my master isn’t disappointed.

With that determination, I opened the match list file once the loading finished.

[Tournament Preliminary Match List (Group ㉮)]

⑴ Emily Ramos vs Daria Rostanova

⑵ Ha Yeon-jae vs Haruka Fujiwara

…

⑹ Lee Hayul vs Aidan Reynolds

‘Hmm… ’

After confirming my first opponent, I hummed inwardly.

Aidan Reynolds.

He was someone I frequently got involved with.

The one who challenged me to a duel during swordsmanship class when I was inexperienced.

Also, the person who was in the same group during dungeon practice and attended the same Ipchun class, taking common lectures together.

There's no ill will. He said he didn't challenge me with bad intentions back then.

In the dungeon, he even spoke casually.

I had no malice.

[Revenge?]

…No malice.

I only vaguely remembered his apology for unsettling me over something I didn't even care about during the dungeon practice.

* * *

In a certain café.

Still reeling from the shock of messing up the first day of the written exams, Aidan trembled upon seeing his first opponent for the tournament.

[Tournament Preliminary Match List (Group ㉮)]

…

⑹ Lee Hayul vs Aidan Reynolds

…

Lee Hayul.

Aidan’s eyes wavered, unable to focus, upon seeing that name. The coffee cup in his hand shook along with him.

– Thud, thud

“The match list is already out. Who’s your opponent?”

Atila, who had placed a piece of cake on the table, approached Aidan from behind and peeked at the match list.

And she saw the name Lee Hayul.

Along with the name next to it, ‘Aidan Reynolds.’

“……”

Atila, with her sharp cat-like eyes, blinked.

She closed her mouth, intending to say something, and took a moment to gather her thoughts.

After a brief contemplation, Atila spoke.

“Good luck.”

After thinking it over, she realized there wasn’t much else to say.

CHAPTER 108
MIDTERM EVALUATION (3)

The written evaluation seemed to have concluded without any major issues.

Though it was more difficult than the previous reference materials and past questions, making me stumble a bit, it wasn't to the point where my score would plummet.

Just about average?

I seem to have done well on the parts I studied and not so well on the parts I didn't.

In other words, I couldn't solve what I hadn't learned, but I did solve what I had learned.

This should still keep me from hitting rock bottom, I hope. A small sense of expectation.

After finishing the written evaluation on the second day.

The practical evaluations, starting on the third day, were conducted according to each major.

Combat, Magic, Support, Crafting.

The practical evaluations were grouped by major.

I, being a special admission student without a specific major, was assigned to the Combat Major practical evaluation under my Master.

But the Combat Major practical evaluation had a somewhat tricky aspect.

This was because the one-on-one combat tournament would begin the very next day, causing most to focus on that.

Most students allocate significant energy to the tournament, and the professors generally understand this.

Within such an atmosphere, the theme of the Combat Major practical evaluation was dungeon strategy.

Several students were placed in a Grade 4 dungeon, and their scores were based on the order in which they reached the specified location upon entry.

The environment, traps, types, and numbers of monsters within the dungeon varied.

Moreover, since many students in the same dungeon aimed for the same location, encounters were possible.

Evaluations would be based on how one responds and reaches the destination.

Although it was allowed to brute-force through traps and monsters in a straight line, it wouldn't yield high scores.

The intent might be to assess survival skills and judgment in the event of being stranded alone in a dungeon.

Recalling my memories from Shipnaha felt a bit strange.

In any case, the practical evaluation was conducted.

The practical evaluation schedule was from the third day to the morning of the fourth day.

For the Combat Major students in the dungeon, the time limit was one day and a half… about 36 hours.

And.

"…Cadet Lee Hayul. Arrival time: 21 minutes 13 seconds."

I arrived at the destination quickly, receiving almost full marks.

It was a resounding victory, so to speak.

The assistant's expression upon seeing me at the destination was quite amusing, suggesting my record was impressive.

Although the assistant was astounded, I had half-expected this outcome upon learning about the practical evaluation.

After all, I had no reason to struggle here.

The most challenging part of dungeon exploration is often not combat but navigation.

Even a Grade 4 dungeon, the lowest, is excessively vast inside.

Of course, superhuman students could cross it quickly, but considering the inherent dangers, that would be madness.

However, I could afford to be mad.

I could observe every single trap embedded in the dungeon.

The power of Observation.

Though I couldn't fully utilize it due to lack of proficiency, it was still the ability granted by the Tower of Observation.

I could easily cover and analyze a Grade 4 dungeon.

Determining the presence and types of traps.

Identifying the species and numbers of monsters, their strengths and

weaknesses.

Measuring the shortest and safest route to the destination within the dungeon.

Continuously re-evaluating and adjusting for variables.

All of these were completed within three minutes of entering the dungeon.

After that, it was smooth sailing.

I just followed the path drawn in my mind towards the destination.

In the process, I didn't encounter a single trap or monster, nor faced any threats.

I moved along paths where I wouldn't come across any dangers.

"Whew…"

Thus, I was able to breathe the outside air within about 30 minutes of the practical evaluation starting.

It felt like I had just gone for a short walk.

Taking a gulp of water, I thought about the remaining schedule.

'All that's left is the tournament.'

It's now the morning of the third day. The tournament preliminaries will proceed continuously from the afternoon of the fourth day.

Of course, the tournament is the most important event.

So, I should use the remaining time to prepare for the tournament.

I have more free time than others, so I should use it well.

And I have the most reliable mentor.

Ending my thoughts, I tapped the hologram.

[Contact: Master]

▸Me: Master, I just finished the practical evaluation

▸Me: Can I come over now?

▸Me: (Puppy eyes emoji)

The reply arrived quickly.

.

.

.

At the Tower of Growth.

To compensate for the lost sight and impaired spatial perception, I sharpened my senses to capture all the surrounding movements.

I used my tactile and auditory senses to grasp all surrounding presences and drew a mental map based on the gathered data, continuously updating it as the battle progressed.

If I had to compare it, it was similar to echolocation.

Thinking back, it seemed like an ability unique enough to be considered a special skill on its own.

Reflecting on it, there was a smaller but similar unique trait I had realized last time… Perhaps it didn't reach the level of a unique ability because it was still underdeveloped?

In any case.

Echolocation, implemented through my senses, fell to the wayside once my spatial perception and the powers of Observation and Space were recovered.

It wasn't useless, but it couldn't compare to the powers of Observation and Space.

However, it wasn't entirely useless.

I had already learned the hard way by overly relying on spatial perception.

Had I been a bit slower in sharpening my senses, I would have been eliminated by the students' concentrated attacks without proper countermeasures.

That was the level of danger even in the tests within the Tower of Growth.

If it were a real battle?

I wouldn't just be eliminated; I would have been brutally killed, a tragically futile death despite my desperate struggles.

And there's no guarantee that such a disaster won't happen again.

Having realized that spatial perception was the power of Observation and Space, granted by an external entity, I understood its limitations.

I could handle most pressures and even counter-attack effectively.

I intuitively felt that I could deploy a wide and precise observation range even within the Tower of Growth.

But nobody knows when even such powers might fail.

After all, the powers of Observation and Space were not my inherent abilities but those received from outside.

They were not entirely my strength. They were the powers of an external entity.

In fact, they could be taken away at any moment.

From the moment I realized the powers and considered the worst-case scenario of them being seized, I felt the need to invest in abilities like echolocation.

– Poke, poke…

'Ugh… '

As a result, my Master was pinching my cheeks.

Echolocation… In other words, sensory training.

A duel with Aidan was a significant event for me.

In the duel at the beginning of the semester, my victory was a narrow one, achieved through a mix of luck and fortune.

If Aidan had not underestimated me and fought with his full strength from the start, or if any of the luck had faltered, I would have lost.

After that, I never dueled Aidan again.

So, what about now?

It might be arrogance, but I had a fair idea of the outcome.

But, as always, you don't truly know until you try. Even Aidan might have had similar thoughts and ended up losing.

The duel with Aidan had a strong significance as an 'evaluation.'

The me from the beginning of the semester versus the me who had grown through various experiences since then.

An evaluation of the gap between then and now.

To understand that accurately, this training was essential.

[Happy]

…It's training.

* * *

The sensation transmitted through my palms was nothing short of heavenly.

Atra, grappling with a strange impulse, carefully squeezed her palms together.

Gently… Lee Hayul's cheeks were squished in her palms. Naturally, the lips in the center were pushed out due to the pressure.

The emphasized lips glistened under the sunlight, highlighting their moistness.

Sometimes, the fingertips would feel a hint of the moisture.

'……'

This time, she grabbed a handful of the cheeks.

The protruding lips retracted, and the incredibly soft cheeks filled her grip.

The cheeks were as soft and warm as a baby's supple skin.

No matter how long she spent together, the fragrant body scent never ceased to amaze…

Suppressing the sudden impulse, Atra released the cheeks.

Then, she rubbed the cheeks with her palms, pressed them, grabbed a handful, and played with them…

Even while taking care of Lee Hayul in the infirmary, she had never openly played with his cheeks like this.

It seemed playful, like she was just teasing his cheeks.

Despite repeating this action, one might expect it to hurt a bit, but Lee Hayul only smiled and pressed his cheeks into Atra's hands, urging her touch.

He resembled a puppy nuzzling into its owner's hand.

…This act was sensory training initiated by Lee Hayul himself, not Atra's coercion.

Atra, reluctantly tearing her gaze away from Lee Hayul's endearing face, observed the necklace around his neck.

– Clink… Clink…

[I'm happy]

[I like it]

[It's warm]

[Soft]

[Satisfaction]

[Warmth]

[Affection]

[Cared for]

[Protected]

The necklace kept making clinking sounds, spouting these words as if it were broken.

Normally, he would blush and turn it off immediately, but now, not having the leisure to do so, he left it on and entrusted himself to Atra's touch.

Atra could sense that Lee Hayul's behavior had significantly changed recently.

It wasn't just about being more clingy; there was a fundamental change in his attitude.

Previously, his language was stiff, and he maintained a distance, often flinching when touched. But now…

He used softer language: 'Thank you,' 'Really?' 'Thanks,' 'Yes,' 'I like you, Master,' 'Can I come to see you?' 'Please pat me,' etc.

Even when his cheeks were openly touched, he calmly offered them without any concerns or doubts, even nudging his face forward.

Not just during training like now, but Lee Hayul reacted similarly when touched unexpectedly.

Though he expressed curiosity by tilting his head, he also cautiously offered his cheek… a peculiar reaction.

As a Master, it was an inappropriate thought, but it seemed he would not resist even if touched somewhere inappropriate, only showing mild surprise…

[I like you, Master]

[Touch me more]

[I like your hand]

"Ahem…"

Atra cleared her throat, trying to dispel the absurd thoughts that couldn't

even be taken as a joke.

Well, since he himself said it was training, what could she do?

Moreover, she confirmed that Lee Hayul's senses were indeed heightened.

The training was effective.

And it wouldn't be right to refuse a request from her disciple.

Muttering a vague excuse to herself, Atra grabbed a handful of Lee Hayul's cheeks.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Atra Clyde

●●●●●●●●○○(82▷83/100)

[Master] [Expectation] [Sense of Security] [Longing for Affection]

[You did not meet the condition to lift the 'Curse of Silence.']

[You did not meet the condition to lift the 'Curse of Loneliness.']

…

[Player Adjustment System: Measurement]

▸Title

[Special Admission Student]

[Young Hero of Shipnaha]

…

[Master of ?? Tower(?)]

[Master of ?? Tower(?)]

…

[Spoiled Child]

…

[Puppy]

▸Stats

…

▸Unique Abilities

[Jack of All Trades]

[Magic Affinity]

…

▸Powers

[Power of Observation]

[Power of Space]

…

CHAPTER 109
TOURNAMENT PRELIMINARY (1)

The tournament preliminaries are conducted more simply compared to the finals.

Only the finals are broadcasted over the internet and watched by external parties.

The preliminaries serve as a process to filter out the cadets who will advance to the finals.

Therefore, the matches are held in different locations rather than a single arena, leading to many overlapping match schedules.

This is true even for the first-year students, and considering the upperclassmen, the number of overlapping matches increases significantly.

As a result, there aren't many people who take the time to watch other cadets' preliminary matches.

Thus, the tournament preliminaries are usually held in arenas with plenty of empty seats, creating a relatively quiet atmosphere overall.

"……"

Usually, that is.

As I stepped out of the waiting room and onto the stage, the murmurs and the density of the crowd made the very air vibrate.

The arena resembled a coliseum.

At the center was a broad sandy ground, surrounded by circular spectator

seats.

The sounds and presence from the audience were far from sparse. It was bustling like a marketplace.

Despite the absence of external parties and being filled only with cadets, it was that lively.

Using the power of Observation, I saw that quite a few seats were filled. There were not only green ties representing first-year students but also red, yellow, and blue ties of the upperclassmen.

These were upperclassmen I rarely encountered due to different living areas.

Among them, there were individuals I vaguely recognized.

People who, unless something happened, would someday become world-renowned powerhouses.

Individuals who would become quite famous for their skills.

Those who, even lacking in combat, could provide influential benefits if befriended.

'And… '

I shifted the point of view of my Observation power to one corner of the spectator seats. There was someone attracting a lot of attention even in the remote area.

An averagely tall individual advertising their superhuman status.

Distinctive but captivatingly sharp features.

Brown hair roughly tied back and green eyes resembling leaves.

A stoic face that stood out even amidst earth and leaf colors.

‘Choi Jiyeon.’

The heir of Taesan whom I had never met before. A main character who was active until the end of the first playthrough.

The moment I recognized them.

– Ding!

An alarm, so familiar that it was almost tiresome, rang out. The sound was like a small bell ringing in my ears.

I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck.

I had neither the Necklace of Confession nor the hologram projector. The Wings of the Sky were also not equipped.

Artifacts obtained within Shio-ram, including personal weapons, were prohibited in the tournament.

I had left them all behind.

Thus, the alarm from the spectator seats wasn’t the reason. There was no reason for such a clear alarm to ring in my ears.

I suppressed the scowl that was about to form. With so many eyes on me, it wouldn’t do to grimace at the opponent entering the stage.

‘Status window? Stats?’

A mysterious alarm.

I had noticed it while staying in the infirmary after being injured in Shipnaha.

Despite not having a smartwatch, the alarm echoed in my ears. At first, I was unsure, but at some point, I became certain it was ringing for me.

‘Is it really a status window? But why doesn’t it show up?’

The first thing that came to mind was the status window. But even when I silently called for it, not a trace of the status window appeared.

It made me wonder if I was losing my mind.

Sighing inwardly, I started warming up.

On the opposite side of the stage, Aidan ascended, clutching a longsword.

Each holding a sword. A stage for dueling. The various gazes from the surroundings.

It was quite a similar situation to back then.

“Long time no… Oh… We met in the lecture room just a few days ago…”

Haha…

Aidan, who approached while checking his equipment, awkwardly opened his mouth.

His expression and tone carried a peculiar emotion, suggesting he also felt the similarity to that time.

“……”

I couldn’t open my mouth either. Just like then, the curse remained unresolved, and I was barely circumventing it with the Necklace of Confession.

But it wasn’t exactly the same as back then.

[The tournament preliminary match will now begin.]

At that moment, the amplified voice of the announcer echoed from inside the building.

[The rule is a virtual duel. Full combat, including Qi, magic, and unique abilities, is allowed. The duel can be arbitrarily stopped at the judge's discretion.]

Unlike the friendly duel last time, this was part of Shio-ram's midterm evaluation, backed by the towers' powers.

It was similar to the state inside the tower.

At least, no one would die, and injuries would be expressed as light streaks similar to back then.

[Then, both sides, ready.]

– Srrng

I drew my sword. The chilling sharpness whispered in my ears, and I slowly took my stance.

Aidan, across from me, also composed himself and drew his sword.

"Aidan Reynolds. Please take care of me."

With his sword gripped firmly in both hands, Aidan spoke with determination in his eyes.

"This time, I won't hold back and will fight with all my strength."

As if to prove his words, there was no sign of carelessness in his stance.

Nodding, I spread the mana from my core throughout my body.

'Qi technique, activate.'

[Then, begin the evaluation!]

As soon as that voice echoed, both sides pushed off the ground.

The distance closed. In the end, the blades met at the center, clashing fiercely.

– Kaang!

The harsh sound of metal echoed. Sparks flew, and Qi-filled pieces of the blades bounced upward.

“Ugh…!”

Unlike back then, it was Aidan’s arm that was pushed back.

Despite the fact that it was a one-handed sword swing versus a two-handed sword swing.

Aidan, undeterred, quickly regained his stance and swung his sword.

I observed the trajectory. Predicting where it would strike and the subsequent trajectory of the follow-up attack.

– Clang! Clang! Clang…!

The swords clashed. The blades scraped against each other, and sparks flew as they pushed back and forth.

My legs, firmly supporting my stance, constantly shifted.

My upper body moved to dodge attacks, and the blade in my hand slashed towards the opponent.

The duel was underway.

Before long, one side started to be pushed back.

It was Aidan.

While continuously pushing him back, I swung my Qi-infused sword downwards.

A blue trail was drawn, and Aidan, struggling to parry the attack, quickly supported his sword with both hands to block it.

Bang!

“Ugh…!”

Aidan groaned. His legs dug into the ground. Dust rose from the dented ground, and Aidan’s legs slowly slid back.

The arms blocking my attack trembled as if hit by an earthquake. They gradually lowered as if losing strength.

Judging that he couldn’t win through sheer force, Aidan gritted his teeth and shifted his weight to his lower body.

He intended to disperse the force pressing down and create a gap to swing his sword wide.

I anticipated this. I responded accordingly.

Before he could swing, I retracted my sword.

Then, rotating my body, I kicked towards his torso, wrapped in Qi.

Bang! My Qi-infused kick struck Aidan’s abdomen.

“Argh…!”

With a loud sound, Aidan’s waist bent like a bow.

Unable to dissipate the impact, Aidan slid back, scraping his feet against the ground.

I immediately followed up, swinging my sword.

Aidan, unwilling to lose, didn’t even wipe the drool from his mouth and thrust his sword forward.

– Clang… Clang! Clang!

The swords intertwined. The number of clashing strikes increased. Qi intertwined, and one side's Qi was quickly being shaved away.

Slash! A streak of light burst from Aidan's shoulder.

Though Aidan responded with a grimace, more streaks of light burst from the continuous strikes.

'Strength.'

In a one-sided contest of strength, I was superior.

'Mana.'

The quality, quantity, purity of my mana, and the strength of the Qi formed from it were overwhelmingly superior.

'Skill.'

I was also better in terms of basic swordsmanship and combat skills.

Aidan was continuously being pushed back, his Qi being shaved away, his body covered in wounds.

"Huff… Huff…"

Aidan, who had distanced himself, panted heavily.

With each breath, streaks of light resembling blood dripped from the wounds covering his body.

These were the wounds accumulated during the duel.

On the other hand, my breathing was steady, and my mana was more than abundant. I hadn't allowed any injuries.

It was one-sided.

It was different from last time.

Aidan hadn't underestimated or looked down on me. He had fought with all his strength from the beginning.

It felt like a world of difference.

It was a very peculiar feeling.

CHAPTER 110
TOURNAMENT PRELIMINARY (2)

“Huu…”

Aidan let out a deep breath. After steadying his breathing, he straightened his body and raised his sword.

I stopped in my tracks as Aidan’s aura changed.

Truthfully, I could have crushed him from the beginning.

The gap between Aidan and me was larger than I had expected.

I could have forced him to forfeit by using my Qi techniques right from the start. If I had bombarded him with magic, he would have been eliminated much sooner. It would have been even easier if I had used the new spirit arts I had learned.

But I chose not to.

Even though this is a tournament for competition and the preliminaries are a means to select those who will advance to the finals, there is a certain etiquette to be followed.

In these kinds of duels, it is common practice not to show one’s full strength from the start.

There’s the intention of hiding one’s cards, and regardless of the gap in skill, there’s also a mutual growth that comes from sharing the experience.

Back then, Aidan also didn’t show his full power immediately for similar reasons.

Srrng. The sensation of a sword being drawn rang out.

Both my sword and Aidan's were already drawn. There was no sword sliding out of its scabbard.

Aidan raised his sword straight. His mana hadn't changed. His Qi didn't swell.

Instead, his aura gradually intensified. It wasn't a tangible force like mana or Qi, but an intangible mental energy.

I tightened my grip on my sword as well.

'Swordsmanship Artistry.'

The unique ability [Swordsmanship Artistry].

Aidan's unique trait.

It's a fairly common unique ability in the original work.

The classification of unique abilities is inherently tricky.

But if one had to categorize [Swordsmanship Artistry]… it belongs to the skill category, specifically focusing on the 'sword.'

Unique abilities in the skill category don't stand out as much as those in other categories.

[Swordsmanship Artistry]. It specializes in the use of swords.

Other cadets can also use swords.

Having a skill-category unique ability allows one to handle a sword better, but it doesn't mean others can't use swords.

While some can emit flames from their hands, turning everything into ashes.

While others manifest water to heal wounds or ice to freeze everything.

While some can manipulate the earth, a symbol of life and strength, and even command dead souls as their minions.

The ability to handle a sword seems rather dull by comparison.

Spears, sabers, fists, and legs.

The ability to handle weapons tends to feel ordinary compared to various supernatural abilities.

In other words, it lacks distinctiveness.

"…Huu."

However, no one underestimates a skill-category unique ability.

Even if there are those who do, they don't underestimate the superhumans who have honed such abilities.

Handling a sword isn't special.

But.

If a single slash could cut through the distant sky, that would certainly be special.

If a single thrust could pierce a mountain and create a gorge, it would be special.

If a single downward strike could cause the earth to sink, it would be a unique ability that stands out among others.

The skill-category unique abilities are particularly adept at manifesting extended abilities. They are designed to do so.

Aidan raised his sword. The rising aura and his unique trait infused into the sword.

And then, the sword came down.

His unique ability extended.

The tip of the sword struck the ground, and a deep slash ran across it.

* * *

I felt nauseous. The reaction was like my internal organs were being twisted.

“Krrk…”

Aidan coughed up a light mist from his mouth and collapsed.

Extended ability, the “Sword Slash.”

Though it’s relatively easier to achieve in the skill category, mastering it is an entirely different story.

Aidan couldn’t yet handle it freely nor bear its backlash.

He couldn’t even catch his breath properly. Beyond the swirling dust, his blurred vision couldn’t make out anything.

Soon, the dust settled, and his vision cleared a bit.

The floor of the arena had a scar wide enough for several adults to lie side by side.

The mark even extended to the opposing wall… leaving a trace on the magic barrier, and right beside it stood an unscathed Lee Hayul.

‘He dodged it as expected.’

Though it was too fast for him to track, Aidan let out a hollow laugh.

Aidan had talent.

Among those of his age group of awakened ones, his talent was particularly notable along with Atila.

Through hard work, he secured a top position in the academy.

However, there were cadets with better grades than Aidan.

Atila herself had better grades than Aidan and was also stronger in terms of practical power.

There were dozens of cadets stronger than him.

Even within the same academy, there were many stronger than Aidan, and expanding the scope to the world, the number increased exponentially.

He had talent. But there were many with more talent than Aidan.

Despite that, Aidan became a cadet at Shio-ram, surpassing others.

He couldn't help but wonder why.

Why was he chosen when there were many stronger and more talented cadets?

– I saw potential in you, not in them. That's all.

The professor who recommended Aidan had dismissed it like that.

What is talent?

Learning earlier than others? Learning what others can't? Becoming stronger faster and further?

Even after entering Shio-ram and receiving education different from the academy days, Aidan's question remained.

Then, he met the special admission student standing across from him.

In a place filled with all kinds of talent, he was a cadet said to possess unprecedented potential.

He was curious.

Everyone he met at Shio-ram sparkled with talent.

Aidan could see it at a glance.

He could discern it.

But he couldn't see what was special about the special admission student.

From the outside, he seemed incredibly fragile.

His frame was small, and his limbs were thin, almost devoid of muscle.

He wondered if he was a mage, yet his mana reserves were minimal.

His unique ability was said to be sensory-related… but in Aidan's understanding, sensory abilities were supportive, not combat-oriented.

Of course, he knew that was a misjudgment. This cadet had been a superhuman for less than a month.

It was natural that his current level was low and undeveloped.

But he was curious.

What made him so special? What was so unique that he was deemed unprecedented among all this talent?

Aidan had often been told that he acted before thinking from a young age.

In a positive light, he had the drive and courage to act.

In a negative light, he was impulsive and short-sighted, not considering the consequences.

So, he charged in.

At that time, he hadn't thought it through, but looking back, it was a foolish act.

A fight with nothing to gain from winning and everything to lose from losing.

And he was defeated miserably in that fight.

It was an embarrassing black mark in his history.

– Step

Footsteps echoed in his ears.

Lee Hayul, who had been examining the scar on the ground, took a step forward.

He had lost.

He had used up all his mana, and his body wouldn't move properly.

"Sigh…"

Still, it felt too humiliating to give up now.

It was still a duel, after all, and he thought he should at least be struck down by his opponent's sword.

With that thought, he tried to rise.

"…Huh…"

His eyes blinked involuntarily.

Lee Hayul had raised his sword.

It was different from Aidan. It was a one-handed sword, and their stances

differed because of their different builds.

But why?

Why did it feel like looking into a mirror?

As he thought about it, an aura rose along the blade of Lee Hayul's sword.

An aura without color, neither mana nor Qi.

The rising unique trait.

Like looking into a mirror…

"Huh?"

Aidan's voice was filled with bewilderment.

An unbelievable assumption formed in Aidan's mind.

It was unbelievable. Naturally, because an inherent trait isn't something one can mimic.

It's special. It's unique because it distinguishes one from others. Even if the process is similar, the results are different, making it unique.

Thus, it's individual and independent. They are different concepts, difficult to divide, which is what unique abilities are.

That was Aidan's understanding. That was what he had learned. It was also the general understanding.

'Jack of All Trades.'

And.

'Extended Ability.'

As if to defy that, Lee Hayul's sword swung down.

'Ever-changing Swordsmanship, Sword Slash.'

The wind split, creating a whirlwind.

Next to the existing mark on the ground, a new line was drawn, parallel to it.

Lee Hayul pulled out his sword, embedded at the end of the new mark.

Jack of All Trades.

A versatile unique ability that falls under the skill category.

Thus, proficient in all fields.

In essence, Jack of All Trades reigns supreme.

CHAPTER 111
TOURNAMENT PRELIMINARY (3)

The tournament preliminary arenas usually don't have many spectators.

Half of the cadets can't watch because they are participating in the tournament themselves.

The remaining half are scattered due to the many overlapping preliminary matches held at the same time.

Aside from a few matches, most of the arenas have a sparse atmosphere.

However, the arena where Lee Hayul's preliminaries were held was one of the exceptions. There weren't many empty seats. Despite the absence of external parties, the place was bustling with cadets.

"…Was that an extended ability just now?"

Thanks to that, the recent duel was witnessed by many.

A cadet sipping a drink cautiously opened their mouth. It took a moment to gather their thoughts before speaking.

In response to one cadet's question, another cadet sitting next to them answered after sorting through their confused thoughts.

"Yeah. An extended ability in the swordsmanship category. It doesn't seem to be from an existing sect, but rather an independent technique…"

In a world filled with supernatural abilities, having the skill to wield weapons might seem like a modest unique ability.

Even if one fights using the properties of Qi, mana, and physical strength,

there's an element of that.

But that doesn't mean skill-category unique abilities are neglected.

The true value of skill-category unique abilities comes from their extended abilities.

It's not just about wielding a sword well; it's about the mastery of swordsmanship that defies the laws of nature.

Down below.

A massive scar engraved on the floor of the dueling arena.

"No matter how skill-category it is, having an extended ability already… and it's still not even the second semester? His name is… Aidan Reynolds? Where is he from? An advanced class?"

"No. I heard he's from a non-superhuman family and in the basic class. His grades are mid-to-low."

The cadet who expressed curiosity tilted their head.

In the skill-category, the manifestation of extended abilities is relatively easier compared to other categories.

"…Is he special?"

Relatively easier. Originally, the manifestation of extended abilities isn't something to be taken lightly.

Even in the skill-category, which is considered easier, it's still not an easy level.

That such an extended ability was manifested and used by a cadet who hasn't even completed the first semester was baffling.

And it was unfortunate that such a cadet was eliminated in the first match of the preliminaries.

“Regardless, his value will rise significantly. Since he doesn’t belong to any faction yet, he’ll be flooded with offers.”

Of course, the news from this match will spread, but if he had shown this in the finals, it would have had a much greater impact…

Moreover.

“I wonder…”

The cadet who trailed off turned their head. Their gaze swept over the scar… and the mark engraved next to it.

It wasn’t a slash from one direction.

The mark was made by dodging an oncoming slash that tore through the ground and immediately countering with an identical slash from the opposite side.

Even recalling it now, it was hard to believe. It felt like a hallucination spell had been cast, making them instinctively attempt a dispel.

“I wonder if it’ll be overshadowed…”

An extended ability manifested by a first-year cadet who hasn’t even completed half of the first semester.

To be honest, it’s not entirely unprecedented.

There have been cases where cadets, after being recommended for admission or showing delayed potential, rapidly soared.

But.

To catch a glimpse of a soaring bird's wingbeat…

And then imitate it, rise together, and shoot it down… Compared to the sensational news about the special admission student, it's far less impactful.

"…It's starting."

After some time, the next match began.

Not much time had passed. There wasn't much time to recover stamina.

This was the nature of the midterm tournament. The preliminary and final matches were held consecutively, requiring careful management of stamina.

Soon, Lee Hayul stepped onto the stage again.

Although there were two people on the stage, most of the attention was focused on one person.

This was partly because of the title of special admission student that had followed since the entrance.

It was also due to the continuous positive growth reports and the heroic deeds from Shipnaha.

And also thanks to the incredible feats shown in the recent duel.

"Huu…"

Despite the discomfort, the cadet opposite did not find it strange.

In fact, the atmosphere on the other side seemed to accept it as a matter of course.

[Then, the evaluation begins!]

"_____, _____, _____…"

However, it wasn't an atmosphere that would easily accept defeat.

The cadet on the opposite side calmed his gaze and formed hand seals.

At the same time, he murmured incantations. The incantations containing intent and mana spread around.

The hand seals and incantations to control mana.

His clothing fluttered. The mana released, causing a small whirlwind, formed a spell in the air.

Whoosh! Spheres of flame formed one after another.

A quick attack achieved through spell simplification and rapid casting.

About ten spheres of flame shot out simultaneously. The red trajectories crossed the arena.

As the attention focused on Lee Hayul standing at the point of impact, he extended his hand.

Unlike the previous duel, he wasn't holding a sword. The sword was simply hanging quietly at his waist.

There were no hands to form hand seals like the cadet on the opposite side, and no voice to chant incantations.

Thus, he couldn't form hand seals, nor did his voice containing intent echo out.

But.

Whoosh! Dozens of flames rose behind him and shot out.

The flame trajectories manifested from both sides of the stage eventually intersected.

Bang! The colliding flames exploded in succession. The deafening explosions filled the air, and black smoke rose, obscuring the center of the stage.

And then.

– Whoosh!

Amidst the smoke, numerous spheres of flame flew towards a cadet, causing their face to scrunch up.

– Boom!

Explosions erupted on one side of the stage.

"……"

Magic manifested without incantations or hand seals.

Most mages can do it. While difficult initially when learning magic, it becomes possible later.

However, few mages actively use it.

There's no reason not to use their hands and mouth for casting.

The advantage of rapid casting without incantations? It's much faster and more beneficial to form hand seals and chant once.

The continuously manifesting magic covered the arena.

Various trajectories crossed the air, and spells burst and shattered the ground. Defensive spells clashed in the air.

It was one-sided.

The magic of one side overwhelmingly suppressed the magic of the other. The number was greater, and the power was far superior.

The stage's control was being devoured by one side. The defensive spells meant to counter were intercepted and neutralized by the opponent.

It was as if the mage had a clear view of the entire area, placing and manifesting spells with precision.

Like overwhelming an opponent with a sword earlier.

Now, he was overwhelming an opponent with magic.

"…Sensory-type."

Choi Jiyeon, who had been watching the scene blankly, muttered.

Her green eyes stared at the spells filling the air.

Extremely clear and efficient spells. Also fluid, always ready to change.

"Huh?"

Her friend next to her reacted to her muttering, but Choi Jiyeon didn't have the leisure to pay attention.

'…Sensory-type?'

At the time of enrollment, it was said to be a sensory-type unique ability.

The previous duel… He had overwhelmingly pushed back a cadet with a swordsmanship-type ability and perfectly replicated the opponent's extended ability.

Now, he was suppressing a cadet likely possessing mana manipulation or magical aptitude with magic.

Recently, there were even rumors of his affinity with spirits of the five elements.

Physical abilities, mana manipulation, unique abilities, swordsmanship,

magic, spirits…

Even possessing just one of these talents would make someone more than capable, brimming with talent. Yet, these talents were all concentrated in one person.

Talent was shining. Potential was radiantly shining.

It attracted everyone's gaze, ultimately earning respect and support.

Choi Jiyeon also knew that kind of brilliance.

Those she interacted with since childhood had that brilliance.

It was the light that Hong Yeon-hwa, who used to run around energetically, possessed.

It was also the light that Baek Ahrin, who always seemed innocent and playful, possessed.

It was a light that she herself, who was with them, didn't possess.

That light… or perhaps an even greater light was shining on the stage, demonstrating how bright it was.

– Squeeze

"……"

Emotions surged. Even she thought it was a pitiful and clingy emotion.

* * *

Suddenly, a dizziness rose from my feet. It felt like electricity was flowing, and my legs began to tremble.

'I'm exhausted… '

My body wobbled. I tried to hold on for a moment, but fearing I might collapse, I used my hand to support myself against the wall.

My breathing was labored. I took a moment to catch my breath.

There were three preliminary matches in total.

In the first match, I faced Aidan. In the second, I fought a magic-specialized cadet, and in the third, a combat-specialized cadet with a focus on unique abilities.

There wasn't much rest time between matches. Maybe that's why the matches didn't take long.

But since the preliminaries started in the afternoon, the outside was now a time when even the sunset was fading.

'Should I not have used the extended ability… '

Jack of All Trades extended ability.

Ever-changing Swordsmanship.

An extended ability with a name that signifies endless transformation, manifested during training with my master.

Its effect is the imitation of skills and actions. Specifically, it imitates techniques in areas where Jack of All Trades has accumulated ample proficiency.

An extended ability fitting for a versatile category.

'It's similar to Homogenization.'

Homogenization mimics the properties of special and elemental unique abilities and mana.

Ever-changing Swordsmanship imitates the techniques and actions of skill-category abilities.

Both share the commonality of mimicking others' abilities, not one's own.

Certainly, using both simultaneously could yield tremendous synergy.

Of course, it depends on my capability…

And right now, my capability isn't enough, leading to this outcome.

'Ugh… '

The strength in my legs gave out. I slumped down against the wall.

'Should I not have used it… '

Skill-category extended abilities generally consume mental power.

While other unique abilities manifest based on mana, skill-category abilities are considered to belong to the realm of technique.

Of course, they also consume mana, but they drain much more mental strength and energy.

Sighing deeply, I shook my head.

I felt it was a mistake to use it.

I hadn't intended to use Homogenization from the start.

The situation wasn't desperate enough to warrant its use, and I wasn't confident in handling the backlash.

Imitating unique abilities isn't unprecedented. But such imitations come with strict conditions and limited scope.

Additionally, mimicking unique abilities of a different level, such as those of

the Gop-hwa and Changhae clans, was fundamentally impossible.

Homogenization was on a different level. With enough proficiency, I could mimic special and elemental abilities relatively easily.

The resources required were purely my mental strength and mana.

It would bring a storm greater than Shipnaha. If the association hadn't controlled the information, I would have been inundated…

But Ever-changing Swordsmanship was slightly different.

Skill-category unique abilities generally find it easier to manifest extended abilities than other categories.

There are several reasons for this… but as far as I know, it's because constructing uniqueness is relatively easy.

For example, in the swordsmanship category… while the specifics may differ, fundamentally, the aspect of 'wielding a sword' remains the same.

Therefore, the extended abilities of the swordsmanship category are fundamentally similar.

Swing to slash. Thrust to penetrate. Smash with the sword.

Slash three times with one swing. Send a slash to cut a distant enemy.

A twisting thrust that pierces through defenses. Or a downward strike that crushes defenses.

Because the core is similar, the results are similar.

Thus, those with skill-category unique abilities often gather to develop their uniqueness together.

These groups are commonly called sects.

In such sects, superhumans with skill-category unique abilities are taken as disciples and taught, leading to the manifestation of the sect's extended abilities.

A representative sect is… the Tri-Sword, which Katsuki Yusei is affiliated with.

A coalition of three swordsmanship sects, it's one of the top forces in Japan.

You get involved with the Tri-Sword if you build a favorable relationship with Katsuki Yusei.

Anyway, for such reasons, the threshold for mimicking skill-category extended abilities is low. It's quite acceptable.

I already discussed it with my master. We concluded there was no need to hide Ever-changing Swordsmanship.

So I tried using it… Did I overestimate my mental strength?

– Whoosh

'Ah.'

At that moment, my nose started to tickle, and then, whoosh- a nosebleed started.

I wiped the trickling blood with a grimace.

– Click

Footsteps echoed from the other side of the hallway. As I wiped my nosebleed, my body flinched.

I had narrowed the scope of my Observation power due to a headache. Therefore, I couldn't see the presence beyond the hallway.

But it was familiar.

The footsteps, the breathing… and the nature of the mana.

It was someone I didn't want to show my current state to.

I hurriedly tried to stand up.

– Thud

'Ouch.'

And my weakened legs gave out, causing me to collapse with a thud. The thud echoed in the quiet hallway, and the approaching presence hurried over.

"Ha, Hayul?!"

Someone I didn't want to show this side to…

Hong Yeon-hwa screamed as she rushed towards me.

CHAPTER 112
GLOOMINESS

“Hmph.”

– Hmph, hmph…

I barely managed to stop Hong Yeon-hwa from carrying me to the healing room, and we agreed to rest for a bit instead.

“One more time, hmph.”

– Sniff…

Inside the break room equipped with a plush sofa and bed.

Hong Yeon-hwa sat me down on the bed, pulled out some tissues, and carefully wiped my nose to clear out the blood.

Her tone was a little embarrassed as she spoke, but it didn’t feel entirely bad, so I quietly leaned my face forward.

“Are you sure? Are you really okay? You’re not hiding any pain, right? Promise me?”

[Really]

[Really, really]

[I’m okay]

I nodded repeatedly.

It was just that I had exerted myself a bit too much and lost some strength.

Even the Necklace of Confession asserted my innocence, but the worry on Hong Yeon-hwa's face wouldn't fade.

Her hands, full of concern, caressed my cheeks, and it felt oddly comforting despite the overprotection.

While it seemed overly protective, it felt strangely good to be worried about.

I liked that worried gaze directed at me, and I liked the way she murmured words of concern while gently stroking my cheeks…

'Uh, so gloomy… '

Even I thought it was a rather gloomy thought. I felt guilty for having such thoughts when Hong Yeon-hwa was worrying about me out of pure goodwill.

– Bzz…

Suddenly, my mind became hazy. It felt different from the dizziness earlier. It was a familiar sensation.

[Sleepy]

[Sleep monster]

[Soft blanket]

I was sleepy. Now that the preliminaries were over, the irresistible sleepiness crept in through my slightly loosened mental state.

'How many days have I not slept?'

I had been awake since the day before the midterm evaluation, so it's been nearly four days?

It was fine when I only had to take written tests or clear simple dungeons, but maybe because of the strenuous fights in the preliminaries, sleepiness

overwhelmed me…

‘I really should sleep… ’

A sudden sense of crisis struck, making me feel like I might collapse and fall asleep right here.

Although it wouldn’t be a problem to sleep here, it would be better to sleep in the dormitory if I could.

Moreover, my first opponent in the finals wasn’t a good match.

[Tournament Finals Bracket (Group A)]

(1) Lee Hayul │ Baek Ahrin

‘Baek Ahrin.’

Of all people, my first opponent had to be Baek Ahrin.

Honestly, I can predict the result, but it’s still a duel against Baek Ahrin, who currently handles Changhae at a high level.

Maybe I should look forward to what I can gain from the process…

Anyway, given the opponent, I need to be in the best condition.

I should quickly head to the dormitory, take some medicine, and sleep.

With that in mind, I tried to get up.

“…Hayul. If you’re sleepy, you can take a nap.”

I couldn’t get up. Hearing the voice from the necklace saying I was sleepy, Hong Yeon-hwa blinked and then suddenly pulled my head into her embrace.

Smoosh… A warm and soft sensation rubbed against my face.

Especially the warmth that permeated through the clothes, making my consciousness rapidly fade.

[Sleepy]

[Soft]

[Warm]

[Dormitory]

'Ah… I need to sleep in the dormitory… '

As I struggled to hold onto my barely-maintained consciousness, Hong Yeon-hwa brought her lips close to my ear.

"It's okay. You can sleep here. I'm here, right? Good boy…"

The gentle voice by my ear urged me into sleep.

The soft sensation on my face and the warmth from being held close actively encouraged me.

– Swoosh…

'Hic.'

Suddenly, my body flinched. A ticklish sensation on my stomach.

I turned on my Observation power to see what it was, and Hong Yeon-hwa was rubbing my stomach through my clothes.

'Wh-what… '

What is this? Why is she putting her hand inside my clothes? I couldn't understand. As question marks floated over my head, Hong Yeon-hwa's hand moved.

– Swoosh, swoosh…

‘Ugh, ahh… ’

Her soft palm rubbed my stomach, transmitting warmth. The warmth filled my hollow stomach and spread calmly throughout my body.

It was soft and warm. It felt like soaking in warm water, making my mouth open involuntarily and my breathing become ragged.

“Good boy. Are you going to sleep well, our Hayul?”

But it was cozy. It wasn’t uncomfortable at all…

My consciousness, already on the verge of collapsing, seemed to melt away.

‘Hong Yeon-hwa said it’s okay? It’s warm. I like my head being stroked. It’s soft. I like the warmth, the patting. Being embraced and cared for, receiving affection from someone, I really love it… ’

My eyes were already closed.

Moreover, my body was already exhausted from the continuous duels.

This was inevitable.

With my back being patted and my stomach rubbed, my consciousness drifted into sleep.

* * *

“…Hayul? Are you asleep?”

Hong Yeon-hwa whispered softly into Lee Hayul’s ear.

There was no response. He just breathed evenly, buried in her chest.

His ragged breath, caused by his stomach being rubbed, had calmed down.

Hong Yeon-hwa's lips twitched. Then she suddenly looked around, startled.

The break room was equipped with various items, including a temporary bed.

Since many matches were still ongoing, no other cadets were using the facility.

After checking her surroundings, Hong Yeon-hwa gently lifted Lee Hayul, who was nestled in her embrace.

She patted his bottom and adjusted his position, moving his seated form slightly upward.

This brought Lee Hayul's face closer, his hair, now soaked in sweat, emitted a thick scent.

"……"

Hong Yeon-hwa swallowed hard as she reached into her spatial pouch tied to her belt.

After rummaging for a moment, she pulled out a cool glass bottle.

A luxurious glass bottle with contents resembling a piece of the Milky Way.

It was a top-grade stamina recovery potion she had prepared in advance.

It was a bit pricey, but the effects were guaranteed.

Since the effect was purely stamina recovery, there was no risk of failing a doping test in the upcoming finals.

Originally, Hong Yeon-hwa would have just handed it to Lee Hayul.

But every time she did, Lee Hayul refused, feeling guilty for always receiving without giving anything back. So occasionally, she would feed him a bottle

while he slept in her embrace.

– Pop

As she pulled out the cork, a refreshing scent filled the air.

…Though the scent was overshadowed by Lee Hayul's own scent.

With one hand holding the stamina recovery potion, she tapped Lee Hayul's lips with the other.

– Mm…

At first, his lips, closed tightly as if wary of external contact, gradually parted with the gentle tapping.

His mouth opened. It was a very easy process. Just a few taps, and his small mouth opened like an automatic door.

Hong Yeon-hwa wore a peculiar expression.

'He seems too unguarded… '

She thought so, but upon further reflection, that wasn't entirely true.

He usually exuded a harmless atmosphere, but there was a sense of psychological barrier.

That barrier was uniquely lowered for a few people.

One of them was Hong Yeon-hwa.

"……"

Gently tilting the glass bottle, she poured the liquid over his pink lips.

– Gulp…

As the liquid trickled down, Lee Hayul's eyes fluttered and he swallowed it.

Hong Yeon-hwa let out a sigh of relief. She had deliberately brought a sweet-tasting potion, fearing he might spit it out.

The contents were quickly consumed.

As the empty bottle dropped away, his open mouth closed again.

– Phew

He then exhaled deeply and buried his face into Hong Yeon-hwa's chest, breathing evenly once more.

"…Hmm."

Hong Yeon-hwa slipped her hand back into his clothes and rubbed his stomach again. She didn't forget to transfer the warmth of Gop-hwa.

This wasn't just an urge to touch; it was to help the potion's effects circulate through his body.

Hong Yeon-hwa looked around once more. No one was there.

Confirming that, she buried her nose in his hair.

– Sniff sniff…

Her nose twitched as she inhaled his scent deeply.

'Wow.'

Her vision blurred.

The indescribable scent filled her nose.

It was a scent she felt strongly at The Tower of Growth, occasionally brushing her nose, stirring strong impulses.

The sweet smell of honey and the refreshing scent of a forest full of life…

“Wow… Seriously, damn…”

Hong Yeon-hwa was so intoxicated by his scent that even the curses she rarely used slipped out.

Then it happened.

[I don’t like swearing]

[Yeon-hwa likes]

Lee Hayul, who was sound asleep, pouted and shook his head.

Startled, Hong Yeon-hwa pulled her head back, and the necklace clinked, emitting a voice.

And then it went silent…

“…Hayul, are you awake?”

Patting his back, she asked. There was no response. His breathing was even again. It was a subconscious sleep talk, it seemed.

Hong Yeon-hwa’s lips trembled.

She glanced at the necklace around Lee Hayul’s neck.

The Necklace of Confession. An artifact gifted by Elia.

Honestly, she was a bit displeased.

She had been looking for a similar artifact to give him, and she felt that Elia had snatched the chance away…

But hearing the inner thoughts that Lee Hayul had been hiding out of embarrassment made her quite satisfied.

She recalled the words the necklace had unconsciously spoken.

Doesn't like swearing. Likes Yeon-hwa…

It was an adorable statement. She even suspected he might be awake and wagging his tail to tease her.

'…This is Hayul's fault.'

The impulse grew stronger. The sticky warmth of Gop-hwa surged.

It was a gloomy delusion fitting for the fuel of Gop-hwa.

But she didn't act on it.

Suppressing the dirty impulse, she carefully stroked Lee Hayul's head.

She knew that acting on this delusion would be the worst choice.

– Should I arrange an engagement, then?

Even without forcing it, she believed that it would eventually happen legally.

When that time came, she could also shed the mask of being a teacher who acted as if she was a mentor while actually being a hypocrite.

By that time, she could legally… do as she pleased.

"……"

Lee Hayul was so fragile that he needed someone to protect him.

So he should be held close and cared for, so he wouldn't get hurt anywhere.

Hong Yeon-hwa genuinely believed that.

Even now, he was sleeping soundly in her arms.

It wasn't Hong Yeon-hwa's force; Lee Hayul wanted this too.

Lee Hayul enjoyed being held in Hong Yeon-hwa's arms, eating what she fed him, and being cared for.

So this behavior wasn't entirely wrong.

Hong Yeon-hwa justified herself and buried her nose in Lee Hayul's hair again.

– Thud

"!?"

A sound of something falling made her snap her head up.

An open door. A plastic bag rolling on the floor and someone's legs.

She realized her mistake. She had been too engrossed. The thick scent had clouded her mind.

Hong Yeon-hwa's gaze traveled upward. She met the quivering green eyes that shook as if an earthquake had hit.

Green eyes. Brown hair. Familiar features.

A pale face and trembling lips were unfamiliar.

Choi Jiyeon.

Currently a second-year at Shio-ram and heir of the Taesan clan.

They were quite close during their childhood interactions as members of the three major clans, and she used to call her 'Jiyeon unnie.'

And recently, they hadn't had much contact.

"……"

It wasn't a pleasant reunion.

Choi Jiyeon's mouth opened and closed. She seemed at a loss for words, and Hong Yeon-hwa checked her own state.

…Holding a sweat-soaked Lee Hayul, rubbing his stomach inside his clothes, burying her nose in his hair, and greedily inhaling his scent…

"Um… I'm sorry for intruding."

"…Unnie? Wait a moment."

The stammering mouth finally spoke. The wandering eyes, unable to focus, squeezed shut, and she turned and left.

It was an escape, not a confrontation.

"No, no! Hey! Wait a minute…!"

Hong Yeon-hwa's plaintive cry echoed through the break room.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Hong Yeon-hwa

●●●●●●●●○○ (84▷85/100)

[?] [Guilt] [Gratitude] [Warmth] [Guilt]

…

Lee Hayul → Choi Jiyeon

●●○○○○○○○○ (21/100)

[Heir of Taesan]

…

[You did not meet the conditions to lift the “Curse of Silence.”]

[You did not meet the conditions to lift the “Curse of Loneliness.”]

CHAPTER 113
TOURNAMENT FINALS (1)

The sun rose on the last day of the midterm evaluations.

Today is the important day when the tournament finals are held.

Most of the cadets who advanced to the finals are tense, making thorough preparations for their matches.

I also intended to prepare accordingly.

Of course, my preparation was only about catching up on the sleep I had missed for a few days.

As a result, I was able to achieve a very full rest.

When my consciousness resurfaced, the headache that usually throbbed was very faint.

In my original world, I lived with frequent headaches, and in this world, it was even worse due to using the Power of Space… the Power of Observation and Space.

But now, the headache had significantly subsided.

My body felt light. When I returned after finishing the preliminaries, my body had felt like a sponge soaked with water, but now I felt surprisingly invigorated.

And it was very warm. My whole body was warm, making me want to snuggle into the soft thing enveloping me.

'……'

The warmth and softness… the gaze poking at my crown and the sensation of Gop-hwa's energy…

My eyelids fluttered. I took a deep breath and activated the Power of Observation.

I recognized the red eyes staring down at me.

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I regained consciousness in Hong Yeon-hwa's dormitory. To be precise, in Hong Yeon-hwa's bed… inside her embrace.

When I recognized the eyes staring down at me, I was truly bewildered.

It felt like a part of my memory had been cut off.

As I carefully traced the blank spots in my memory, the memories just before I passed out resurfaced vividly.

The body that had sagged due to fatigue and the mind that had become groggy from staying up for several nights for the evaluations.

The sleep monster that rapidly surged from my feet.

The embrace that seemed to affirm it and the gentle, affectionate voice…

"Are you hungry? Let's eat before heading out."

After being patted gently in that state, I found myself sitting at the dining table for breakfast.

There was plenty of time. Even considering that I might have the first match, there was ample time to eat slowly and head out afterward.

Without much resistance, I quietly sat at the dining table.

“Why are there two sets of dishes?”

“I’ve already had breakfast.”

“Usually, we eat together. Why not today?”

“Well, the lady was… coughing in her room for some reason—”

“Enough. I understand.”

It seemed Ariel had already had her breakfast.

Hong Yeon-hwa and I sat across from each other at the table. Ariel stood behind Hong Yeon-hwa, waiting.

The table was set with familiar dishes for me.

White rice and miso soup placed side by side. Various side dishes exceeding ten in number and spicy pork stir-fry in bright red seasoning placed in the center…

It was a feast that would have made my mouth water if my sense of taste and smell were intact.

It was the same meal I had eaten when Hong Yeon-hwa visited me while I was sick.

“I’ve prepared this modest meal to the best of my abilities, young master.”

[Thank you for the meal]

[Ariel]

I bowed my head at Ariel’s humble words.

From someone who had cooked just a little, I found it truly amazing that

Ariel could prepare such a meal every day.

I had tried cooking while staying at home after a car accident.

Given my situation and tendencies, I wasn't in a position to go out and find delicious food.

So, out of boredom, I had ingredients delivered and tried cooking while hobbling around.

I didn't learn professionally, and all I did was follow 10 to 30-minute videos and cook on my own.

Eventually, I got tired of it and relied on takeout or convenience foods.

Because of that, I got scolded quite a bit by the housekeeper.

'…Ugh.'

My thoughts drifted off course. I dispelled the lingering regrets and glanced at Hong Yeon-hwa.

She was tapping on a hologram for a brief moment.

"……"

As I waited quietly, Hong Yeon-hwa finished her task and picked up some spicy pork with her chopsticks.

– Nom

The pork went straight into her mouth.

Seeing her cheeks puff up and chew, and then swallow, I finally picked up my spoon.

I took a small bite of rice and chewed.

Something crunched in my mouth. No matter how much I chewed, the unique sweetness didn't come out.

'?'

I swallowed the rice and tilted my head at the strange sensation in my mouth.

I smacked my lips. I touched the roof of my mouth and the insides of my cheeks with my tongue and poked my teeth.

'What is this?'

It felt strange. Like I had eaten something or drank something, but not really.

"What's wrong, Hayul?"

Hong Yeon-hwa asked with a curious look. Even Ariel, standing behind her, looked at me as if asking if something was wrong.

[It's nothing]

I fiddled with the strange sensation for a moment, then shook my head, saying it was nothing.

'It must be my imagination.'

How could I have eaten anything while asleep?

Unless someone deliberately put something in my mouth, there was no way that could happen.

I took a sip of water and swallowed the strange sensation, then picked up my utensils again.

.

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The place where the tournament finals were held was the First Arena located in the center of Shio-ram.

The First Arena is a facility that Shio-ram opens only for important official events.

In other words, it's a place naturally opened for events like today's tournament finals.

After having breakfast and leaving Hong Yeon-hwa's dormitory, I arrived at the First Arena, which lived up to its reputation as a facility for important events, given its vast size.

The central dueling stage alone was several times larger than the one used during the preliminaries.

It wasn't just spacious. Upon closer inspection, the entire facility, including the floor and walls, was densely filled with various spell formations.

With such extensive spell formations, it wouldn't be easy to leave significant marks like the last time.

I don't know much about arenas, but even at a glance, the spectator seats could easily accommodate tens of thousands of people.

"There are so many people…"

The players' waiting room assigned to me was a private room.

Since Hong Yeon-hwa had also advanced to the finals, we parted ways upon arrival.

As I sat in a chair, gathering my thoughts, a knock sounded, and a head of yellow hair peeked through the open door. It was Elia.

Elia, seemingly overwhelmed by the sight of the packed spectator seats displayed on the hologram, spoke in a dazed voice.

– Murmurs

As Elia said, the countless spectator seats were filled with people, packed tightly without any empty spaces, resembling a bean sprout container.

There were even people standing due to a lack of seating.

Inside the players' waiting room, numerous presences could be felt.

[Did Elia get eliminated?]

"Yes, I got eliminated in the third round against a combat-specialized cadet."

[That's unfortunate.]

[Just one more win would have meant the finals]

"It's unfortunate, but I'm personally satisfied. It would have been hard to win the first two matches without the spirits."

Looking at the list of the 16 finalists, there were no cadets with support specializations.

Most were combat-specialized, with a few magic-specialized cadets mixed in.

In the first place, such single duels were not a suitable stage for support or production-specialized cadets.

Considering she was primarily a support-specialized cadet, it was impressive that she managed to win two matches with her self-learned magic and newly acquired spirit arts.

If Elia had won, she would have been the only support-specialized cadet in the finals.

“I’ll be cheering for you from the spectator seats with my family.”

[Family?]

There were many cadets in the spectator seats. It was easy to distinguish them due to their standard cadet uniforms or casual wear.

Cadets who weren’t participating or had been eliminated were also occupying seats.

But even more spots were occupied by external figures.

Unlike the somewhat uniform attire of the cadets, the external figures were dressed in various styles.

Heroes and superhumans who came to witness the budding talents.

Clan representatives dispatched to find promising prospects.

Or families of cadets who managed to visit by chance.

The spectators were diverse.

“So, um… will you have some time after the tournament? My parents wanted to thank you personally…”

‘Uh… ’

Honestly, it felt burdensome, but it didn’t seem right to refuse here.

Moreover, it felt wrong to decline after accepting the Necklace of Confession.

After contemplating for a moment, I nodded, and Elia smiled brightly and grabbed my hand.

“Thank you! Oh, I’ll be cheering for you in the tournament! Of course, since your opponent is Ahrin, I’ll be cheering for both sides. Ehehe…”

I shook my head to indicate it was okay to Elia, who laughed awkwardly.

[I would've cheered for both sides too]

[Thank you for cheering]

"Thank you for saying that."

As the time approached, Elia apologized for taking my time and stood up.

"Still."

Before leaving the room, Elia peeked her head in just like when she came.

The smile on Elia's face was awkward but filled with genuine encouragement.

"I hope the benefactor achieves great results."

– Click

With those words, the door closed. Once again, only the sound of the relaxing instrumental music filled the players' waiting room.

'Great results, huh… '

Honestly, I didn't expect to win.

I knew it would be difficult to win against Baek Ahrin or Hong Yeon-hwa at this point.

While I was growing exponentially, other cadets weren't just idling around.

The two who were already on par with active heroes at the time of enrollment were no exception.

Even in the previous iterations, the only one to win against those two at this point was the invincible warrior.

I had a different goal. To achieve that, even if I didn't win, I needed to display my skills widely.

If I showcased remarkable abilities and potential here, various parties would reach out.

Even the groups that would bring future calamities.

'……'

The calamity events from the original work.

It was already too late to turn my back on them.

With the knowledge I had and the power I would gain, I couldn't just run away without doing anything.

I also knew how many would be sacrificed in those calamities.

And I knew there were many who could stand against those calamities.

Shio-ram is a cradle for nurturing heroes to stand against calamities.

Despite various motives such as money and fame, most graduates have been active as heroes, involved in suppressing dungeons and monsters.

That includes Hong Yeon-hwa, who will one day graduate and become the head of the Gop-hwa clan.

Baek Ahrin, who will become the head of the Changhae clan, will be the same, and so will Elia, who will be active as a hero.

Not just cadets, but also my master who hasn't retired yet and Professor Liana, whose abilities remain unchanged despite her retirement.

Directly or indirectly, everyone will be affected and involved in the calamities.

Would only good results await them?

Based on my knowledge of the original work, I imagined.

There were no good results.

‘I don’t want that.’

I could say it firmly.

That was absolutely unacceptable. Even thinking about it made me nauseous. I couldn’t allow such a scenario.

I hated that scenario more than the idea of my own death.

So I had to do something.

Confidence? I didn’t have any. I didn’t think highly of myself.

But there was something I had to do.

‘Special admission student. Power of Observation and Power of Space.’

It felt like someone expected that from me.

Special admission student. A special status granted by the Master of the Tower of Growth.

Power of Observation. The ability granted by the Tower of Observation.

Power of Space. The ability granted by the Tower of Space.

Though it’s just speculation, they must see some potential in me to give me such benefits.

So…

‘I can’t run away.’

I shouldn't stand by. I shouldn't get discouraged and hide in a corner.

Even without confidence or certainty, I had to struggle.

To lift the curse… and for the people who care about me, I had to struggle.

It's not a game where I can just create a new character if I die, so I can't act like it is.

I've known that from the start.

But even imagining not considering my life like in a game, I failed.

The invincible warrior in the game, created through countless luck and coincidences, also failed.

Life is precious, but if I want to cherish it, I can't be cautious and hold back.

'During the vacation… I'll have to go out again.'

I'd love to stay in the cradle, but I can't.

I have to visit the main house of the Gop-hwa clan with Hong Yeon-hwa and find the hidden pieces.

There are things I need to find and destroy as soon as possible.

– Woo…

[Attention. The first match of the tournament finals will begin shortly—]

An announcement echoed through the instrumental music.

The tournament finals were about to begin.

[Contact: Master]

▸Me: I'm off to do my best in the finals!

…

‘Hmm… ’

It seemed a bit stiff.

After hesitating for a moment, I added an emoticon.

▸Me: (An emoticon of a puppy standing on two legs, saluting)

This puppy emoticon was very similar to the one from my original world. I remember being oddly happy when I first found it.

After leaving a final message for my master, I got up from the chair.

[—Cadet Lee Hayul. Cadet Baek Ahrin, please complete your final preparations.]

The first match was between me and Baek Ahrin.

CHAPTER 114
TOURNAMENT FINALS (2)

The spectator seats of the First Arena.

Among them, in the special seats where professors and related personnel were seated, Atra stared intently at the hologram floating before her.

▸Lee Hayul: Understood (5 weeks ago)

…

▸Lee Hayul: Yes, I'll be back safely (4 weeks ago)

…

▸Lee Hayul: I'm off to do my best in the finals! (Just now)

▸Lee Hayul: (An emoticon of a puppy standing on two legs, saluting) (Just now)

The hologram displayed the message history with Lee Hayul.

Messages that had just arrived a few minutes ago and the past messages unfolding above them.

Atra flicked her finger, scanning through the past history and then the latest entries again.

The change in tone from top to bottom was evident, even without audio, just from the text.

If she had to evaluate, the previously stiff tone had softened and become more affectionate.

Atra chuckled softly. It wasn't a bad feeling. In fact, it was a change that brought immense joy.

Compared to the past when he seemed distant despite his appearance, she was pleased with his current affectionate and playful demeanor.

His attitude towards training wasn't lacking either. He approached each moment with utmost effort, eager to learn and realize even a little more, making him a lovable disciple.

What master wouldn't be delighted with such a disciple? Perhaps only those out of their minds wouldn't be.

As she thought so and smiled, someone plopped down into the empty seat beside Atra.

"Oh… I'm dying…"

At the exhausted and groaning voice, Atra glanced sideways.

Long, black hair flowing past the waist, half-lidded green eyes.

Even without looking at her appearance, the vast magical presence was unmistakable.

It was Liana Velus.

"Weren't you too busy to attend?"

She was someone who would be extremely busy due to the midterm evaluations.

A professor teaching the already limited number of spirit arts students.

Even that would swamp her with work, but being tasked with setting and evaluating the midterms in her first year as a professor had her drowning in a sea of tasks.

That's why she was lamenting about not being able to enjoy her favorite drink.

Among the people Atra knew, none were as heavy drinkers as Liana. Not drinking for days, or even weeks, must be stressing her out immensely.

"That's not why I'm not drinking."

"?"

Liana shook her head.

Atra turned her head fully to look at Liana.

Her eyes seemed to question the messages she sent every few days, complaining about missing her drinks.

Deciphering Atra's gaze, Liana shook her head again.

"It's not because of the midterms, but because of Lee Hayul."

Atra, momentarily startled by the sudden mention of his name, nodded slightly.

"…Why?"

"Why? You saw it. He has a fit just smelling traces of alcohol."

Atra furrowed her brows tightly.

That time. The day her past self, who had learned nothing from previous tragedies, experienced a significant shock…

It made sense.

That shock had made Atra unable to touch cigarettes since then.

Even for Atra, who maintained a stance of not getting attached, it was that

shocking.

If such a thing happened now…

If Lee Hayul were to meet Atra and react with nausea and a face full of disgust…

'Ugh… '

Just imagining it made her head spin. Her heart felt like it was freezing and shattering into pieces.

This time, Atra might also faint…

It made sense why she had temporarily quit drinking…

Yet, there was something odd. Or rather, something a bit displeasing.

Glancing at Liana, who stretched her hands to the sky, Atra spoke.

"…If it's causing you that much stress, wouldn't it be better to just drink?"

"If I drink, I might get hated by Lee Hayul."

"Just get hated and drink."

"You speak so lightly… Ah."

Clicking her tongue, Liana suddenly exclaimed as if she remembered something.

"I'm thinking of teaching Lee Hayul spirit arts intensively during the spare time between the end of the midterms and the start of the vacation… What does his master think?"

"Spirit arts…"

Atra hummed thoughtfully. She had heard of Lee Hayul's affinity for spirits

long ago.

Not just an average level, but an almost abnormal affinity for nearly all attributes.

It was Liana's assertion, one of the few who had mastered spirit arts. If he had such qualities, it was undoubtedly beneficial for him to develop them.

Lee Hayul was not someone with mediocre qualities. He had natural talents that allowed him to learn and utilize martial arts and magic simultaneously.

Learning spirit arts was undoubtedly the right choice. Although Atra wasn't a spirit mage, she had enough experience working alongside and against spirit mages on the front lines to know how helpful it could be.

Learning it was the right choice.

Yet…

"…It's good for him to learn."

Why did she feel slightly displeased?

[The first match of the tournament finals will begin shortly.]

[Cadet Lee Hayul, Cadet Baek Ahrin. Both cadets, please proceed to the stage.]

As Atra made a complex expression, the announcement echoed again.

Both of them straightened their postures and turned their gazes.

Everyone seated in the special seats did the same. None present there harbored any lack of interest in the upcoming match.

The same held true for the spectators below.

Cadets watching their peers and juniors, their families.

Industry professionals eager to witness the potential of the next generation.

All eyes were focused on the central stage. Specifically, on the two pathways leading onto the stage.

* * *

After a brief waiting time, I walked down the passage as the announcement instructed.

The passage illuminated by soft lights from the ceiling felt particularly dark compared to the brightness emanating from the connected stage.

My feet stepped on the boundary between light and darkness.

As I crossed the boundary line on the floor…

– Woooaaaah!

A roar of cheers and murmurs filled my ears.

It was a reaction I hadn't experienced during the preliminaries. The response exceeded my expectations, and I almost froze, but I naturally extended my steps.

Even while crossing the stage, the resonating noise within the building continued.

There was no need to use the Power of Observation. Even with a fraction of my senses, I couldn't help but feel it.

The countless gazes piercing my entire body like the tangible result of the wind's blows.

The loud noise filling my ears was almost deafening unless I adjusted my hearing, and the vibrations transmitted through the floor reminded me of countless aftershocks.

Numerous people's attention was focused on me. Among them were peers like me, senior cadets I had never met, and even some I had a slight acquaintance with, like Aidan or Atila… and also Elia.

Elia was conversing with unknown individuals on either side of her…

On Elia's lap sat the taciturn child I had met in Shipnaha, quietly seated.

I had heard she was safe, but seeing her looking healthy and uninjured brought a sense of relief.

The individuals seated on either side of her appeared to be middle-aged men and women, suggesting they might be the family Elia mentioned.

There were also individuals who looked like they belonged to associations, scouts from private clans, and others who seemed determined to write even a single line about the event.

All those gazes still felt burdensome and uncomfortable.

If it had been at the beginning of the semester, I might have felt my heart sink.

Of course, now I was somewhat accustomed to it and didn't think much of it.

The place for unease and tension had long been filled with the calm before a battle.

Emotions aren't very helpful in combat. While they might aid in manifesting innate abilities, they aren't beneficial for the battle itself.

– Step

As I adjusted my emotions just in case, the presence I had felt from the beginning stepped onto the stage.

Holding a supply-grade spear lightly in one hand.

Blue hair tied back and a face adorned with a serene smile.

It was Baek Ahrin, the heir of the Changhae clan and the top student of Shio-ram's first year.

As she appeared, cheers erupted once more.

Despite the resounding noise, Baek Ahrin didn't seem nervous and simply waved at the audience with a smiling face.

She stopped at the center of the stage.

Baek Ahrin and I stood facing each other at a reasonable distance.

[The countdown for the first match of the tournament finals begins now.]

[60, 59, 58…]

57—! 56—! 55—!

As the mechanical voice echoed through amplification magic, the audience followed along, counting down loudly.

"Hayul."

While I was doing the final check, Baek Ahrin, who was also checking her state, suddenly spoke from the opposite side.

"Don't you find it a bit boring to just duel like this?"

"?"

I tilted my head, wondering what she meant. I wasn't wearing the Necklace of Confession.

Seeing my reaction, Baek Ahrin chuckled and continued.

"Well, just to increase our will to win, how about a simple bet?"

‘Increase our will to win… ’

It wasn’t strange to suggest a bet to make the fight more interesting. It was common for friends to place bets on the outcome of their matches.

Baek Ahrin still wore a serene smile. There was no malice to be found in her genuinely positive and gentle face.

‘Activate, Power of Observation.’

I activated the Power of Observation in detail.

Observation.

To observe and measure phenomena, conditions, trends, and changes.

Narrowing the range, increasing the density of information extraction.

I observed Baek Ahrin. I studied her smiling face.

…Beyond the face covered by a ‘mask.’

I gauged the true expression beneath, devoid of any discernible emotion.

‘…… ’

The phrase “wearing a mask” typically isn’t used positively.

It often refers to someone who hides their true feelings and fabricates a facade.

My perception of Baek Ahrin was also that of a strategist.

She had the intelligence and wisdom for it. She knew how to make her enemies suffer without much effort, and she had the ability to assess the current situation and plan for the future.

Baek Ahrin’s behavior towards me had been… actions taken while wearing a

mask.

But it somehow felt sincere.

Her actions of showing unusual kindness and approaching to befriend me seemed to mix truth and falsehood.

It was genuinely confusing.

In my brief contemplation, the countdown had already dropped below 30.

– Nod

I nodded. Baek Ahrin's face brightened with a radiant smile.

"In duels like this, the bet is usually the same, right? How about a simple wish?"

– Nod

"Hmhm! Sounds great!"

I nodded again. The countdown dropped below 10.

9—! 8—!

Fuuu… Exhaling deeply, I prepared myself.

7—!

I readied myself to act as soon as the countdown ended.

6—!

"I'll tell you my wish in advance."

5—!

‘Suddenly?’

4—!

At that moment, Baek Ahrin, who was also preparing, casually spoke.

3—!

“If I win…”

2—!

Trailing off, Baek Ahrin’s lips curled into a smile.

1—!

“I’ll take one day of your time, Hayul.”

‘?’

[Match start!]

Her smile and tone were meaningful.

The mechanical voice announcing the start, echoed by the audience.

A torrent of water shot towards me.

‘…!’

I twisted my head. Crash! The water stream that had aimed for my face slammed into the wall behind me.

Baek Ahrin waved her hand. The water stream wavered briefly before lashing out like a whip.

I kicked off the ground in response. The water stream narrowly missed me, striking the floor and walls instead.

Crash! The high-pressure water stream shaved off the barrier coating the walls. Scattered magic particles and spell formations. And the marks left on the wall.

A wall that was supposed to be nearly impossible to mark with just any force.

“Since I gave you a heads-up… I’m going all out!”

I pulled up my magic power, still in shock.

Baek Ahrin laughed heartily, gripping her spear firmly with both hands and raising it high.

The spearhead pointed downward, and her hands naturally drove it into the ground.

Thud! The spear pierced the ground like cutting through tofu. The spear shaft was swallowed by the ground.

– Drip…

Suddenly, droplets of water formed on the exposed spear shaft. The small droplets trickled down the shaft, following the blade into the ground.

And then.

– Gush!

A surge of blue water erupted from the ground where the spear was embedded. It only took a moment for a puddle to form beneath Baek Ahrin’s feet.

A small puddle.

But I could feel the blatant energy soaking my skin.

The blatant release of water energy. And the rapidly expanding aura…

'No way.'

It was a familiar motion. Enough to recognize the technique. Which made it all the more shocking.

– Roar!

The puddle exploded. The ground where the spear was embedded erupted with a massive volume of water, like a waterfall in reverse.

From droplets to a puddle.

From a puddle to a tidal wave capable of swallowing several people.

Unique ability, Changhae (Blue Sea).

Expansion ability.

'Tidal Wave.'

The ground beneath my feet was submerged in a dark shadow.

And a blue tidal wave surged to engulf the shadow.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Baek Ahrin

●●●●●○○○○○ (56▷57/100)

[Affection] [Curiosity] [Confusion] [Speculation] [Unfairness]

CHAPTER 115
TOURNAMENT FINALS (3)

When thinking of the element of water, I rarely found it particularly threatening.

It's because we encounter it so frequently in daily life, and in everyday situations, water isn't threatening.

We drink water to quench our thirst every day, and we casually pour it over our heads when we feel sticky.

Perhaps because of this, water as an element never seemed particularly threatening. We rarely needed to be cautious of the water we eat and drink daily.

But logically, I knew.

The element of water… among the phenomena composed of water, some are more than capable of taking a person's life.

'No.'

The sticky sensation of water clinging to my skin. The gloomy air.

The surge of mana and innate energy, the violent wave of water bursting from the ground where the spear was embedded.

The vast stage was being stained black and blue.

Shadows covered the ground, darkening it.

As a sizable wave swept the floor once, the stage gradually began to submerge, centering around Baek Ahrin.

The water gradually encroached. The stage, large enough to cover several soccer fields, gradually turned blue.

‘Damn it… ’

I silently screamed in my mind.

‘So unfair…!’

It was unfair. Also cowardly. Such emotions welled up inside.

Distracting me just before the duel began with strange words, then launching a surprise attack as soon as it started.

Not only that, but she also unleashed her expansion ability before I could even get my bearings.

A shocking development in many ways.

I was trembling with a sense of betrayal, but a part of my mind acknowledged that it was typical of Baek Ahrin.

On the surface, she was always gentle and lively, but inside, she was cold and resolute, displaying a dual nature.

– Swoosh!

I was bewildered, but I could still hear the sound of water in my tense ears.

As soon as I detected the blue line cutting across my observation range, I kicked off the ground.

The spot I had just been standing at was pierced by a water jet. I dodged the sweeping blue line while moving my body.

– Slash!

The blue water jet cut across the floor and wall, leaving clean lines.

Crash! The vibrations fiercely pounding my eardrums and the subsequent sound of slicing and explosions made my lips tremble.

The stage's floor and walls were solid. The material with guaranteed durability was reinforced with multiple layers of defensive magic.

Cold sweat ran down my back when I saw the clear marks of slicing that extended from the floor to the wall.

The water jet… was different from what you'd find in a showerhead. It couldn't even be compared to a showerhead.

It had the intensity of a water jet cutter. In reality, it was even more powerful.

Seeing me dodge, Baek Ahrin whistled and waved her hand.

In response to her gesture, droplets of water floated into the air.

Water droplets the size of a person's head bubbled and quivered, then shot out a fierce water jet.

'Tsk.'

I clicked my tongue and harnessed my mana.

The mana spread throughout my body, empowering my form, and the qi that rose from my body enveloped me.

Boom! I kicked off the ground and dived under the sweeping water jet. The end of my hair brushed past it, and I maneuvered forward.

I dodged one water jet.

The water droplets floating behind Baek Ahrin were massive.

And they weren't just one or two. From the numerous water droplets, an equal number of water jets shot out.

Not just in straight trajectories. Water jets lashed and swept like whips, slicing through the stage.

Three water jets followed in succession. After them, numerous more jets pursued.

Facing the fierce water jets cutting through the air, I kicked off the ground without hesitation.

'Power of Observation.'

I didn't perceive the world through my eyes. I simply gathered and analyzed the information from my surroundings and acted accordingly.

I observed the trajectories of the water jets. I predicted their future paths. Based on the observed information, I calculated my next actions.

It was a familiar task.

I moved my body according to the calculations. My well-trained body moved as calculated. I twisted and lowered my body, narrowly dodging the water jets.

For the trajectories I couldn't avoid, I thickened the qi around me to deflect them.

The output of the water jets was indeed impressive, but they weren't powerful enough to pierce through my qi in one go.

I repeatedly kicked off the ground.

The distance between us narrowed.

'The ground.'

I didn't let my guard down. I was on alert for the ground… specifically, the water gradually covering the stage.

Elemental abilities are greatly influenced by the environment.

They demonstrate greater power in areas rich with the energy of their element, and conversely, their output is reduced if opposing elemental energy dominates the surrounding.

Expansion ability.

Tidal Wave.

An expansion ability focused on controlling the environment.

From the ground where the spear was embedded, a massive amount of water continued to gush out.

Regardless of the element, the surroundings, which had a reasonable mana density, were gradually getting saturated with water energy.

The longer this continued, the more advantageous the environment would become for Baek Ahrin.

I didn't have a technique to completely change this environment.

'Approach.'

However, not much time had passed since the expansion ability was activated.

It wasn't fully manifested yet. It was still at a moderate level.

In other words, now was the most advantageous time to engage in close combat.

With that in mind, I approached while keeping an eye on the water covering the floor.

With Baek Ahrin's level of elemental control, the water on the floor could

easily rise up like countless spikes.

'……?'

For some reason, the ground didn't rise. Baek Ahrin allowed my approach with a subtle smile.

The distance closed. I pushed aside the questions and clenched my fist, pulling it back.

Rumble! Mana wrapped around my fist. The qi, more solid and fierce than before, surged around it.

Baek Ahrin also pulled one hand back, just like me.

Water energy turned into qi enveloped her arm. It was the same.

And then.

The qi coiled like a serpent around her elbow.

'?'

The clear blue qi, reminiscent of the sea and sky, wrapped around her elbow, forearm, and wrist in turn.

I thrust my pulled-back hand forward.

Baek Ahrin, instead of a fist, extended her palm.

"First move."

With a small whisper, the coiled qi shot out like a rapid current.

Roar!

The torrent of water blocked my fist. The pressure transmitted through my arm was immense. My arm bent.

The pressure continued to grow. The once surging current turned into an eddy, pushing my fist away.

The qi got shaved off. I could withstand it, but I couldn't push back.

With that judgment, I twisted my body and pulled back.

Boom! With a loud explosion, my body was flung into the air. I didn't resist the force and let it propel me diagonally.

The arm that lost the power struggle cried out in fatigue.

Roar! The spot where I had been standing was long engulfed by the eddy. The swirling current eventually collided with the stage wall before coming to a halt.

The eddy lost its form and dissipated. The floor and wall, where the water had splashed, were terribly shredded.

'Whirlpool Water Palm.'

A technique used by a few members of the Changhae clan, including Baek Ahrin, in the original work.

It's a martial art designed to utilize water energy, which was originally specialized in support and healing, for combat.

I knew about it. I knew Baek Ahrin used it, and I confirmed it when I raided the Changhae clan's vault in the game.

'Why?'

But it puzzled me. The slight unease I felt since the beginning of the battle grew.

It wasn't unusual for Baek Ahrin to use the technique, but I didn't understand why she would.

Whirlpool Water Palm. A highly useful technique for members of the Changhae clan with specialized water energy.

However… for Baek Ahrin, who was specialized not just in water but also in ice, there was less necessity to use it.

The same goes for earlier. While it was shocking, I didn't understand why she launched a high-pressure water attack at the start.

Nor did I understand why she allowed me to approach and countered with the Whirlpool Water Palm.

If she had used ice to attack first, it would have been more threatening…

'I don't get it.'

Would leading with a water-based attack be more advantageous in battle? At least in the original work, Baek Ahrin didn't fight that way.

I couldn't fathom her intentions. But standing idly wasn't an option either.

– Hoo…

I exhaled heavily and took in the outside air.

It was damp. I could clearly feel that the water energy had already permeated a significant amount.

'Tsk… '

The ground where the spear was still embedded continued to gush water as if it were a spring, submerging a large portion of the stage.

The water had spread close enough to reach my feet here, even after I had widened the distance.

The spread was faster than I anticipated. At this rate, it might rise to the

point where my entire body would be submerged soon.

Moreover, if the accumulated water was used for attacks or froze over, it would be troublesome in many ways.

If I wasn't going to wield the same water energy, the environment was advantageous for my opponent.

'In that case… '

After confirming to that extent, I tapped into my core.

I drew out a significant amount of mana and spread it throughout my body.

I didn't add it to my physical form. I simply spread the mana throughout my entire body.

During this, Baek Ahrin maintained her distance, watching me.

The subtle smile on her lips, her usual ambiguous actions, her peculiar responses earlier…

She was a person I couldn't fully understand.

'Expansion ability.'

Clicking my tongue, I manipulated my mana.

'Homogenization.'

At the Tower of Growth, I unconsciously mimicked Gop-hwa. In Shipnaha, I mimicked Changhae and Midday Sun.

After being discharged and returning to Shio-ram, I tested various things and figured it out.

What I realized was that, naturally, it wasn't just Gop-hwa, Changhae, and Midday Sun that I could mimic.

Thump! My heart trembled. The subtle innate energy expanded from my core and enveloped my entire body.

It changed. The mimicked ability overlaid itself.

The mana filling my body fluctuated. The qi surrounding my body also fluctuated.

Momentarily unstable like a torch before a storm, it soon stabilized, glowing a clearer blue than before.

– Splash

The sound of water echoed. The waves gradually approaching eventually reached the wall and covered my feet.

And then.

The qi, imbued with a bluer hue than before… 'water energy', engulfed the water.

It didn't help much, but the qi slightly swelled.

"……"

– Drip, drip, drip

Droplets of water fell from the ends of my hair.

Expansion ability, Homogenization.

'Water Flow.'

Mimicking Changhae too blatantly gives away too much. I can't handle the consequences.

But there's no reason I can't use the water attribute itself.

With mana manipulation alone, I can handle water energy.

I can use water-based magic, water elemental skills, and even water spirits.

'If I wasn't going to wield the same water energy, the environment was advantageous for my opponent.'

In that case, I just had to wield the same water energy.

Breathing steadily, I stomped the ground hard, propelling myself forward.

Baek Ahrin widened her eyes in surprise, then pulled her arm back again. As before, water jets coiled around her arm.

Simultaneously, multiple water spheres floated behind Baek Ahrin, shooting fierce water jets in succession.

Whirlpool Water Palm.

And the water spheres floating behind were remembered as Water Mirror Spheres.

I dodged the water jets being shot and swung.

This time, water jets also shot up from the ground without passing through the Water Mirror Spheres.

With the Power of Observation, I could easily detect the signs. My body moved well. Dodging was simple.

– Pshh!

Occasionally, I got grazed and hit, but since the qi was now imbued with water energy, the damage was less than before.

Dodging and countering the fierce water energy attacks, I closed the distance.

The distance was now quite narrow. It was a situation similar to before.

This time, I also pulled my arm back.

I manipulated my mana. It was the same.

Qi surged. It was the same.

And…

Roar…! The qi enveloping my arm wriggled. It coiled around my arm like a snake.

‘Whirlpool Water Palm.’

I thrust my palm forward. The two whirling currents collided and swirled against each other.

– Roar!

The fierce currents and whirlpools tangled and disrupted each other. I resisted as best as I could… but naturally, I got pushed back.

I twisted my wrist. I only deflected the trajectory of the whirlpool just before it dissipated.

Baek Ahrin’s whirlpool grazed past me.

My posture twisted.

Baek Ahrin’s Water Mirror Spheres didn’t miss the opportunity and shot water jets.

There were six. I acted based on the observed information.

I dodged three. Two were grazed with qi.

The last one rushed toward my forehead.

I didn’t move particularly.

Just before the last water jet hit my forehead.

– Bang!

It was intercepted mid-air by a water jet shot from behind me. Numerous droplets splashed across my face.

A small water sphere, slightly smaller than a person’s head, floated behind me.

Whirlpool Water Palm and Water Mirror Spheres.

Even if it’s not Changhae, I can mimic the techniques.

Lacking proficiency? Honestly, how often have I faced someone less proficient than me?

And rather than retreating for that reason, it’s better to charge in and learn.

After all, there’s a suitable teacher to teach water and ice right in front of me.

The teacher, Baek Ahrin, wore…

– Hehe

A deeper smile than before.

Nodding as if satisfied, she manipulated the water energy again.

The water flow coiled around her arm like a snake, and the Water Mirror Spheres behind her quivered, preparing to attack.

Additionally, the water covering the ground resonated, vibrating in unison.

It seemed she was about to fully utilize the water that had been appropriately spread.

Changhae's manipulation… or rather, it was the rapid and precise attribute manipulation that was awe-inspiring.

'……'

But why?

To me, observing her… the process felt as though it was meant for me to see and learn.

* * *

[The unique ability [Mana Affinity] is growing]

[The unique ability [Jack of All Trades] is growing]

CHAPTER 116
FREE UP YOUR TIME TOMORROW

Shio-ram.

An educational institution founded by Neriel Claidya, once known as the Silent Magician during her prime, and now referred to as the Master of the Tower of Growth.

It is also the world's premier institution for training superhumans, unparalleled by any other.

It is a place where the young talents of the world dream of stepping foot into.

In such a place, the cadet offered blatant preferential treatment under the Principal's orders is known as a special admission student.

For the past 120 years, there had not been a single instance of this, making it something akin to a motivational drawing for the cadets.

But now, there was an actual cadet occupying that position.

A cadet who was essentially proclaimed to be specially anticipated by the Master of the Tower of Growth, the first in Shio-ram's history.

It was only natural for the world to be abuzz.

The name Lee Hayul spread far and wide.

Special admission student. Followed by Lee Hayul.

And then, characteristics such as blind, mute, frail body, sensory-based unique ability, and orphan trailed behind.

Blind, mute. A frail body that couldn't support movement, and a unique ability unsuitable for combat.

Not the conditions for a hero to close dungeons and fight monsters.

Doubts followed, which was only a natural process.

[Scotland's Shipnaha, a chain of dungeon outrages occur. A disaster strikes without warning.]

[Scotland's administration declares, "Currently aggregating the range and scale." A state of emergency proclaimed.]

[The hero who saved the city out of the shattered disaster. A cadet of Shio-ram?]

Doubts followed, but Lee Hayul always proved himself.

The steady and remarkable achievements whispered within Shio-ram reached the insiders, while the heroic deeds in Shipnaha spread to the public.

The news was heard.

But few witnessed it.

The subtly conveyed news. Dozens of lines of articles and blurry videos cut short under the pretext of protecting cadet information.

Even with this, the proof of qualification was sufficient, but a minority still couldn't fully accept it. And some hadn't yet felt it.

"Crazy…"

Muttered one of those who couldn't fully accept it.

Those next to him heard the mutter but couldn't respond.

They were having similar thoughts.

The stage where the duel was taking place was far below the spectator seats. It was at a height that even three or four adults standing on each other's shoulders would struggle to reach.

– Roar…!

A wave surged. It was more than enough to swallow several people and crashed into the barrier, dissipating.

The spectator sitting at the very bottom flinched and shrank back as the wave rushed up to the edge of their seat.

The stage was submerged as if a tidal wave had swept over it. The floor was no longer visible, having turned into a turbulent sea.

– Roar!

In the center of that sea, two figures collided.

A giant whirlpool surged. Waves shattered and scattered in all directions, and the force of the impact shook the sea.

The colliding whirlpools canceled each other out and dispersed. The aftermath shook the sea again, and newly formed whirlpools continuously clashed.

"Wow…"

"What in the world…"

Everyone was left speechless.

The blue color that reached up to their feet.

The fierce waves that seemed about to crash down on them.

The whirlpools that looked capable of crushing ordinary people to bits in an instant.

These sights were deeply etched into the minds of everyone seated in the audience.

There were two people fiercely fighting on the stage.

Baek Ahrin. The heir of the Changhae clan. The definite future leader of the next generation.

Everyone knew this fact. The prestige of the Changhae clan and the information about the heir occasionally appeared even in mainstream news.

But the opponent… there was little known about Lee Hayul.

Most of those seated here did not know the full extent of Lee Hayul's capabilities and strength.

Many came here with the intention of discovering his true potential.

As a result, those who visited with that purpose achieved part of their goal.

Once today's evaluation is reported, even the small number of doubters will mostly vanish.

* * *

'Oh… '

I let out a gasp. My mouth opened on its own, almost uttering an exclamation.

Was it too understated? Baek Ahrin pondered over the expression.

Amazement? Surprise? Astonishment? Satisfaction? A small hope? Desperation?

It was too complicated to identify each emotion individually. It didn't seem necessary to dissect them in detail.

All those feelings combined made up her current emotion.

With a bright smile, Baek Ahrin watched the scene in front of her.

The stage had long turned into a sea filled with water.

Expansion ability, Tidal Wave.

The environmental dependency of elemental ability users. An expansion ability that changes the environment itself to be advantageous.

It consumed an enormous amount of mana… but someone like Baek Ahrin, with a naturally large mana capacity and who consumed elixirs like meals, could manage the consumption.

Because the environment was tailored for her, Baek Ahrin could lightly stand on the sea.

– Boom!

She wasn't the only one standing on the sea.

A short distance away. A small figure could be seen charging, shattering the waves.

The energy swirling around the figure. Clearly blue, water-infused qi engulfing and pushing through the waves, closing the distance.

– Bubble…

Behind Baek Ahrin, Water Mirror Spheres floated.

There were only a dozen earlier. Now there were nearly fifty.

– Bang!

Dozens of water jets sliced through the air. The sound of the explosions as they tore through the wind was different.

She had increased the output and mixed ice particles into the water jets, making them difficult to handle with qi alone.

– Bang!

Water jets were also shot from the opposite side. Water Mirror Spheres floated and fired water jets.

There were only about ten. The output was lower, and there were fewer of them.

They couldn’t block them all. Handling them with water-infused qi was demanding.

At this point, it looked like Baek Ahrin had an overwhelming advantage.

– Roar!

Up to this point, it seemed so.

Behind Lee Hayul. Amid the twenty or so Water Mirror Spheres, mana spread, forming complex spell formations.

Simultaneous casting, the practice of using magic during combat.

Rapid casting for use in urgent battles.

Multi-casting, the activation of multiple spells simultaneously.

The intricate spell formations were designed to prevent and counteract breakdowns and malfunctions.

A spectacle of attack magic, ranging from the lowest to mid-low level, filled the air.

Dozens of water jets, twenty or so water jets, and numerous spells clashed in the air.

– Crash!

The waves rising up couldn't withstand the impact and shattered into pieces. Seizing the opportunity, Lee Hayul sprinted across the sea.

As the distance closed, Baek Ahrin waved her hand.

– Crackling…!

The sea Lee Hayul was running across suddenly froze solid. The transition from water to ice happened in an instant.

The frozen sea gripped Lee Hayul's ankles, and spikes of ice shot up to tear his body apart.

Boom! The mid-level spell 'Shockwave' manifested from Lee Hayul's leg, shattering the ice that gripped him.

Whoosh! The spears of flame that rose in the air clashed with the ice spikes shooting up from below.

While the flames couldn't melt everything, the blunted ice spikes couldn't hold Lee Hayul back.

'Such a colorful display.'

I got that impression from Lee Hayul, who momentarily paused before charging again.

Red. The fire spirits circling around evaporated the approaching water and melted the ice.

Green. The wind spirits behind him created gusts that accelerated his movement.

Blue. The water spirits around his feet helped him stand on the sea and subdued the force of the waves and water jets.

Brown. The earth spirits skimming the stage floor suppressed the rising water and occasionally rose to block attacks.

Fire, water, wind, and earth spirits. While not directly participating in combat, they provided indirect assistance to make the battle easier.

There were no lightning spirits. Perhaps Lee Hayul refrained from using them due to the difficulty of handling them in a water-dominated environment?

'Hmph.'

Baek Ahrin chuckled. He sure has many talents.

Appropriately utilizing spirit magic, which relies heavily on innate talent.

Mimicking others' expansion abilities and replicating the Changhae clan's techniques with martial prowess.

Quick, complex spell casting that's hard to counter.

All made possible by an unusually high level of mana control.

A sensory-based unique ability that, despite closed eyes, seemed to provide an all-seeing vision.

He truly has many talents.

Baek Ahrin had heard people say this about him, and now she found herself saying it about others.

It was quite amusing.

No, the entire situation was rather enjoyable. It felt like a small glimmer of

hope had grown larger.

And especially that.

The sight of fire spirits melting the ice was truly satisfying.

With a bright smile, Baek Ahrin raised her spear.

A spear crafted with ice. It felt cold and unpleasant as it gripped in her hand.

She drew mana from her core. The vast amount of mana flowed through circuits and into the spear.

Roar! Suitable ice and qi mixed, causing the spear to swell.

The spear grew larger. The immense energy surrounding it.

A clear sign of a powerful strike.

In response, Lee Hayul reacted. He pulled his arm back, gathering mana and energy, which surged.

A signal to answer with a strike.

He could have refused. He could have dodged the strike and continued to make minor attacks.

But even Lee Hayul knew that was a disadvantageous scenario.

Dragging the battle into a long fight wasn't beneficial for Lee Hayul.

Also, he had to consider the next match if he won.

Dragging it out into a long battle and winning with all his strength drained wouldn't be good for either side.

There was no reason to drag it out. Thus, he responded to the blatant strike.

The graceful water energy Lee Hayul had been using coiled around his arm.

And then, the inside of the water energy turned cold and formed crystals.

They soon shattered, becoming part of the swirling cold within the water energy.

Whirlpool Water Palm. The martial technique that utilizes water energy for direct combat, combined with the use of cold.

The process was smooth and seamless. It was clear he had learned well.

With a satisfied smile, Baek Ahrin pulled her spear back.

The distance closed. Except for the spear in Baek Ahrin's grip, it was similar to their initial clash.

'Expansion ability.'

It was slightly different. Lee Hayul, who had been charging in, hesitated for a moment, then thrust out the technique enveloped in a whirlpool.

A whirlpool of water and cold surged across the sea.

It had impressive power. The wind lashed at her, making her hair, which had come undone, whip around, and the force pounded against her body.

If it hit directly, it would cause considerable damage, even to Baek Ahrin, who had an affinity for water and cold.

In response, Baek Ahrin felt a strange mix of regret and relief.

If Lee Hayul had used not just Gop-hwa and Changhae but other means as well… she couldn't guarantee victory.

She raised her spearhead towards the approaching whirlpool.

Expansion ability.

An expansion ability following Tidal Wave. She personally found it very uncomfortable to use.

But still…

‘Sorry, but I have to win for the bet.’

Baek Ahrin thrust her spear.

Expansion ability.

‘Frozen Sea.’

A small whisper. Following it, the expansion of mana and innate energy.

The mana within the spear. The mana within her body. All the surrounding water energy converted to cold.

Cold surged forth.

…

A world that had been turbulent and blue turned silent and white.

The waves froze in their surging forms, and frost settled even on the protective shield of the spectator seats.

– Crackle…

The chill creeping from her right arm was unbearably unpleasant.

It made the expression on her mask twitch.

Amid the rising discomfort.

Baek Ahrin suddenly turned her gaze forward.

“……!”

She widened her eyes.

A black hand stopped just a bit away from her face.

It was very close to the area where Frozen Sea had manifested. Naturally, it should have been frozen and turned white.

But Lee Hayul wasn't frozen.

He had protected himself from the influence of Frozen Sea. Only the palm covered by a sleeve was visible.

– Phew, phew…

The air was so cold that her breath was visible as she exhaled.

The extended arm trembled as if it were unbearably cold.

It seemed all his strength had drained, and he was just standing there.

But he hadn't frozen.

He wasn't engulfed by the cold.

He wasn't tainted by the extreme cold.

If Lee Hayul had a bit more strength left, the outcome might have been different.

"……Hmph."

A soft laugh escaped. It felt like a small glimmer of hope had grown larger.

Her still heart pounded.

Something lodged in her heart felt displeased. But to Baek Ahrin, it was rather delightful.

With a bright smile, Baek Ahrin pulled Lee Hayul into a tight embrace. Lee Hayul's head was buried firmly in her chest.

With a surprised expression, Lee Hayul struggled in panic.

He flailed. It was a reaction of bewilderment.

There was no discomfort or rejection. Baek Ahrin's smile deepened upon confirming that.

It seemed the aversion had lessened enough to allow a hug.

"I won."

Lee Hayul, who had been struggling in her arms, suddenly stopped moving. Then he rubbed his face and lifted his head.

Though his eyes couldn't be seen, it felt like he was sulking, implying it was unfair.

That pricked her conscience a bit. She had disturbed his focus before the first move and then pushed him with her expansion ability.

"…But I still won, so I'll take one day of your time, Hayul. So…"

Baek Ahrin lowered her head. Objectively cold… but to Baek Ahrin, it was a warm touch as her lips brushed his earlobe.

"Free up your time tomorrow. Got it?"

The whispered words tickled his earlobe with her breath.

Lee Hayul's body shuddered, and he nodded slightly.

* * *

The underground waiting room for the players.

It had everything. A soft bed and sofa.

A refrigerator filled with all kinds of drinks and alcohol, and a pile of snacks…

And a hologram floating in the air broadcasting the ongoing finals match.

The match had just ended… showing Baek Ahrin hugging Lee Hayul tightly.

"……What the…"

Seated on the sofa, leaning back, the person held a glass with floating ice.

– Clink!

The ice melted. The drink and ice mixed, and the mixture bubbled and evaporated into steam.

"That bitch…"

Hong Yeon-hwa muttered a curse under her breath, trying not to crush the glass in her hand.

CHAPTER 117
FINALS

‘As expected, no injuries.’

Using the Power of Observation, I carefully scanned my physical condition, meticulously checking for any permanent injuries or aftereffects.

The result was that I didn’t find a single scratch. Only then did I release the observation that had been revolving around my external and internal body.

It’s thanks to the Tower of Growth. Just like inside, all the damage received on stage was nullified as an illusion.

If it weren’t for such measures, there would have been numerous casualties.

And I would have been left with aftereffects.

The strength of Changhae lies in its versatility with water and ice.

Compared to Gop-hwa, it does have lower offensive power.

But no one would dare ignore Changhae… or more precisely, the frost of Changhae.

Once a part of the body is hit and frozen by Changhae, it’s difficult to revive it.

Ordinary means can’t melt the ice of Changhae.

Ice intended for binding is incredibly tough to break, and even if it’s shattered, the frozen part gets completely destroyed.

That’s why fighting against Changhae is so tricky.

When ice attacks, it's hard to break. Once hit, the area around it freezes, and breaking that results in the frozen part shattering as well.

When water energy gets involved, it becomes even worse.

Imagine being surrounded by fluid water energy that all turns into cold and attacks. It's utterly terrifying.

Especially, Baek Ahrin's frost is dangerous.

Just as Hong Yeon-hwa's output of Gop-hwa is unparalleled, Baek Ahrin receives similar evaluations.

Two members from the three great clans, both in the same generation, possessing unprecedented levels of unique abilities.

It's a cause for celebration in Gop-hwa and Changhae, but for Taesan… it's a mix of complex emotions.

Especially for the younger generation of Taesan, who are of the same age as Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin.

Anyway.

That's why I was cautious of frost throughout the duel… but for some reason, Baek Ahrin mainly used water energy during the fight.

Even though she used frost towards the end, the feeling of significance remained.

And…

– Free up your time tomorrow?

'What's that about.'

I'm puzzled by the reason for such a bet. I don't understand why she would

go as far as to make a bet to have a day of my time.

…And why did she just suddenly hug me…

The sensation from earlier still lingered on my face.

Shaking my head roughly and rubbing my cheeks, I tried to dispel the intrusive thoughts that kept resurfacing.

Rubbing my cheeks until they hurt a little seemed to help fade the lingering sensation.

As I sighed deeply.

“Hayul, why are you doing that all of a sudden?”

Elia, who was sitting next to me, reached out with a puzzled expression.

A soft hand touched my flushed cheeks from my rough rubbing.

Soon, gentle strokes followed, accompanied by a faint light.

It was her unique ability, ‘Healing Melody,’ manifesting slightly.

[I just had some thoughts.]

[I’m okay now.]

Being lost in the gentle stroking, I finally came to my senses.

I shook my head, indicating it was nothing. Naturally, the hand withdrew.

Even though my cheeks, healed by Healing Melody, were still red.

Feeling a strange sense of regret, I sneakily glanced around.

I wasn’t the only one being watched.

Besides Elia, who was sitting next to me, people across from me were also looking this way.

A middle-aged man and woman, and three young children…

The middle-aged man among them smiled warmly. It was a smile full of life, much like the one I often saw on Elia.

“Haha. I was worried my daughter might have been impolite, but seeing you two get along well puts my mind at ease.”

[No.]

[If anything, I’m the one being a bother to Elia.]

After being swiftly defeated by Baek Ahrin, I was too scared to meet my teacher immediately, so I visited Elia’s family instead.

When I asked when I could meet them, they said it was possible immediately despite the tournament being ongoing, so we arranged a meeting.

Elia’s parents… gave off the impression of typical Western parents.

Her father, Trian Slade.

A middle-aged man with blonde hair and golden eyes. He didn’t give off the impression of a bald eagle or a pot-bellied man.

He just seemed well-built. His face had few wrinkles for his age, making him look much younger.

Next to him was her mother, Ayla Slade.

A woman with the same blonde hair and clear sky-blue eyes as Elia. Despite her age, she looked very young.

It was also clear who Elia inherited her physique from.

“Dad, do I really seem like such a troublemaker? I’m always so careful.”

Seeing my awkward smile, Elia pouted, a rare sight.

Then her mother responded incredulously.

“I find it hard to believe that from the same person who uprooted the millennium tree, our village’s pride…”

“Aah! It’s unfair to bring up mistakes from so long ago!”

“Too many mistakes for it to be just a childhood blunder, and it was only recently, wasn’t it? You even destroyed Mr. Billion’s ranch fence two years ago—”

“Hayul, Hayul! Those are all old stories! Cover your ears. Don’t listen…”

At first, it was awkward, but it seemed Elia inherited her parents’ friendly nature, making both of them very approachable.

They also seemed to notice my discomfort at receiving thanks, so they didn’t bring up gratitude much after the initial greeting.

Thanks to that, we were able to talk in a relatively comfortable atmosphere.

During that conversation, I also heard some embarrassing stories about Elia’s past.

Judging from the stories… Elia’s childhood seemed quite dramatic.

It didn’t match at all with the soft, considerate demeanor I had seen so far.

“Aww… How can you bring up things from so long ago…”

Elia was now slumped, her head on the table, mumbling in defeat from her parents’ attacks.

Giving her an awkward smile, I glanced around.

Across from me, her parents were holding a boy and a girl on their laps.

Both had yellow hair, looking like cute little chicks, and were sleeping soundly, breathing deeply.

And in the middle, not on anyone's lap, sat a girl… staring intently at me.

With hair like chick fluff and half-open eyes that seemed indifferent to the world.

Her name was Adela Slade.

I met her in Shipnaha… Elia's younger sister, whom I saved.

"……"

In the suddenly quiet room, the mother patted her back, and the girl blinked slowly before bowing her head.

[Thank you for saving me.]

A hologram with a thank-you message appeared next to her bowed head.

I had received many thank-yous.

My email inbox was full, and my dorm room was full of thank-you letters.

On my way out of the hospital, some people who somehow recognized me offered their thanks.

Just a moment ago, Elia's parents had bowed deeply and expressed their gratitude.

"……"

Yet my heart felt unsettled.

Many people were saved by my actions in Shipnaha. I had acted with that

intention.

But at the same time, I had regrets.

As I took my first step, wildly casting spells as my circuits strained, getting flown away by Aerulus, blocking the shelter's entrance and facing death, I regretted it.

Hearing thank-yous made me feel proud, but phantom pain reminded me of my regrets.

"……"

I glanced around.

Until just a moment ago, everyone had been laughing and chatting politely, but now they were looking at me with a peculiar gaze.

One of them was Elia.

The first person to help me with genuine goodwill in this world, who had helped me in many ways during my time at Shio-ram.

Someone I thought I had gotten quite close to in this world, who had been laughing and chatting, now smiling.

If… the child in front of me had died in the accident, Elia wouldn't be here laughing with her family.

She wouldn't be smiling happily as she was now.

After a moment of thought, I smiled and tapped my necklace.

[I should be the one thanking you.]

The regret lessened, and the pride grew.

* * *

The tournament continued even after Lee Hayul was eliminated.

Matches were held, followed by brief breaks, and then the next cadets came up to compete.

A grueling schedule, with all matches from the round of 16 to the finals being held in one day.

Several hours passed swiftly, and finally, the finals of the tournament commenced.

A one-minute countdown echoed on stage.

“You damn bitch.”

Hong Yeon-hwa, who stood on stage, immediately cursed.

Baek Ahrin, who was coming up from the opposite side, wore a peculiar expression.

Lately, she had been restraining herself, keeping an eye on Lee Hayul, but now she was freely letting it out.

Even feeling somewhat nostalgic, Hong Yeon-hwa opened her mouth again.

“What did you do to Hayul?”

Baek Ahrin replied promptly, as if she expected the question.

“What do you mean? I just caught him because he was about to fall.”

“Really? Looked perfectly fine to me. Didn’t seem like he was about to fall at all. And also…”

Whoosh! Flames rose from her shoulder. The surrounding stage shimmered like a mirage. The intensity was daunting.

Hong Yeon-hwa’s eyes turned a fierce red.

“What did you say right before the evaluation started?”

“Uh… Let’s play together next time?”

The cadet’s voices are not broadcasted. Baek Ahrin averted her gaze as she spoke.

“I’ll take a day of Hayul’s time?”

“Oh.”

They could probably see the lip movements.

This was a lost cause. An awkward smile appeared on Baek Ahrin’s face.

11—! 10—!

The countdown was nearing its end. Hong Yeon-hwa tilted her head.

“Any more excuses?”

“…Thinking about it, I don’t think I need to make excuses~”

“What?”

Baek Ahrin sighed and raised her spear.

Seeing this, Hong Yeon-hwa’s intensity grew even fiercer.

“I just asked a friend’s friend to hang out for a day. Is that something to be criticized for?”

“…Ah, really?”

Bang! Hong Yeon-hwa slammed the sword she was holding on her shoulder into the ground. With a loud noise, the sword stuck into the floor.

1—!

[Start of the evaluation—!]

The countdown ended. The start signal echoed.

Whoosh—!

“Then just die.”

Gop-hwa Expansion Ability

Blaze Bloom

A massive flame erupted from the ground where the sword was embedded.

“This is an exam, Yeon-hwa…”

Changhae Expansion Ability

Tidal Wave

In response, a vast surge of water energy and cold overflowed from the opposite side.

The finals, likely to be recorded as the fiercest in Shio-ram’s history, had begun.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affinity]

Lee Hayul → Elia Slade

●●●●●●●○○○(73▷75/100)

[Affection] [Pride] [Gratitude] [Chick]

…

Lee Hayul → Baek Ahrin

●●●●●●○○○○(56▷60/100)

[Affection] [Curiosity] [Confusion]

…

[You did not meet the condition to dispel the “Curse of Silence”]

[You did not meet the condition to dispel the “Curse of Loneliness”]

CHAPTER 118
MIND YOUR WORDS

Lee Hayul's fierce battle certainly left a significant impact on everyone, but ultimately, it resulted in his elimination in the round of 16 of the main tournament.

Of course, no one in their right mind would belittle him for only making it to the round of 16, but if we just consider the results, that was the outcome.

Atra didn't particularly feel displeased about it.

Above all, she had no intention of blaming Lee Hayul.

There was no reason to.

Given the opponent, Atra knew that Lee Hayul did his best within his capabilities.

Blame? If anything, he deserved praise for his efforts.

[I'm sorry…]

"……"

That was the intention…

Atra turned her gaze away, trying to suppress her trembling lips.

Right after the finals ended, Lee Hayul had quietly come to her. When he said he was going to visit Elia's family, whom he had grown close to, she let him go.

And now he was here.

She didn't understand why Lee Hayul was standing in front of her with his head hung low, looking so dejected.

She didn't understand why he was all hunched over as if expecting a scolding any moment.

Why did he seem so convinced that Atra would rebuke him…

She felt someone's gaze from the side. Turning her head, she saw Liana looking at her like she was staring at a bag of trash.

– Why are you looking at me like that?

– Right in front of you.

'……'

Where Liana pointed, Lee Hayul was all hunched over. Atra couldn't even retort and clamped her mouth shut.

Feeling a mix of emotions, a sigh naturally escaped her lips.

"Sigh…"

– Flinch!

Lee Hayul's shoulders jumped, and his whole body trembled.

'Ah.'

Atra realized her mistake and widened her eyes.

She had sighed deeply in front of a child who was already terrified he might get scolded…

– Ugh…

A suppressed groan escaped from Lee Hayul's tightly shut mouth, and Liana,

standing next to him, sent an astonished look.

Atra, startled, waved her hands.

She tried to clear up the misunderstanding. She wanted to tell him there was no need to be so downcast. There was absolutely no reason to scold him. After all, he had done well enough with the current results…

– I don't particularly care about special admissions. While I won't blindly deny it, I won't fully endorse it either.

She tried to clear it up.

But a past remark suddenly came to mind, and her body froze.

– While it's the Principal's chosen personnel, it's true that I had my doubts because it hadn't been proven yet. Understand? If you were a regular cadet, it wouldn't matter, but as a special admission, there are high expectations of you.

It was something she had said in the past, considering Lee Hayul's situation, to give him a sense of caution.

– Not just me, but everyone, the public's eyes are on you. Regardless of the circumstances. You are the first and only special admission chosen by the cradle's master.

Lee Hayul must have remembered all the remarks Atra had forgotten.

– Though I understand you just awakened, such excuses won't be tolerated in the future.

"……"

Atra's complexion turned pale. She finally understood why Lee Hayul looked so downcast.

Why he seemed so scared, why he thought Atra would scold him.

It was the result of her past actions coming back to haunt her.

“I-I’m sorry…”

Atra shut her eyes tightly and pulled the hunched Lee Hayul into a tight hug.

Every time she moved, Lee Hayul flinched and showed a pitiful expression, but he slowly relaxed in her embrace.

At first, he was bewildered, but as her hand gently stroked his head, he sighed in relief and buried his face into her chest.

They say you should be careful with your words when raising a child.

Atra suddenly recalled a sentence she had heard in the past.

Given his unfortunate past and precarious present, she had been too harsh and thoughtless with her words.

Atra felt a surge of anger towards her past self and hugged the squirming Lee Hayul even tighter.

…An unfortunate past.

Lee Hayul, like Atra, had lost his parents at a young age.

But Atra immediately awakened as a superhuman and lived in a high-quality educational institution.

Lee Hayul, on the other hand, wandered the back alleys with a body damaged by fire before finally entering a rundown orphanage.

Even there, he didn’t get much help, and after the orphanage burned down, he moved to another where the situation was similar.

In such a past, he must have felt a severe lack of affection and missed out on

basic education.

…That's why he didn't reject Baek Ahrin's hug.

Atra's eyes darkened as she patted Lee Hayul's back.

As someone who claimed to be his teacher, Atra also had to teach him things like this.

Not just boosting his combat abilities, but also teaching him the knowledge needed to live.

He should know to reject hugs from strangers or people he wasn't close with.

Though Atra herself wasn't a great role model, she had clear things to teach.

As time passed.

Atra looked down at the soundly sleeping Lee Hayul in her arms with a peculiar expression and suddenly surveyed her surroundings.

Lowering the barrier, the empty special seats came into view.

Liana had left, pushed to evaluate the midterm, and everyone else had long gone, leaving no one around.

"……"

After a moment of thought, Atra stood up.

Naturally, she carried the sleeping Lee Hayul with her. As she moved, Lee Hayul stirred and she gently soothed him, continuing her steps.

It didn't feel right to wake a child sleeping so soundly. Since he was asleep, she thought it best to let him rest.

With that thought, Atra headed for her lodgings.

– Ding!

On the way, an alert from the hologram projector around Lee Hayul's neck rang.

Curious, she checked and saw a message from a contact named 'Hong Yeon-hwa.'

"……"

– Tap

With a gesture, Atra dismissed the hologram. She then quickly and simply set it to silent mode.

* * *

There are old abandoned factories scattered everywhere. Regardless of the so-called peace, minor and major incidents are bound to occur.

One such abandoned factory was in Germany. This nearby city had collapsed for some reason, and the machinery that once operated actively had long become useless scrap.

The inside of the abandoned factory, where even thieves turned away due to the lack of anything valuable except scrap metal.

A man leaned back in a creaky junk chair, tapping his foot in boredom.

– Static…

The annoying noise made the man frown and turn his gaze.

In front of him was a rectangular object.

The frame was black, and the glass in the center was filled with noise.

It was a communication device driven by electricity, not magic, from before

the great upheaval.

“Damn it.”

In other words, it was a piece of junk, treated as outdated hundreds of years ago.

The man leaned his head back weakly, lamenting his situation, using a communication device that should have been long retired and given a proper send-off.

Who in this day and age doesn’t know about holograms? Who doesn’t use them?

From young children to wrinkled old folks, everyone wears smartwatches on their wrists.

A true symbol of modern civilization. Not knowing about holograms would get you labeled a barbarian.

“Shit. I was once a cherished young master…”

The man felt like a barbarian himself.

Wondering how he ended up in such a place…

As he wallowed in his small lament.

– Static—!

The noisy communication device finally displayed a screen. The quality was terrible, and the image kept lagging.

It was because the signal was interfered with by magic waves.

Every time he looked at the screen, he couldn’t help but feel miserable.

He wished he could get a smartwatch or at least a hologram projector, but

that would immediately give away his location, and a hunting squad would quickly descend on him, so it was impossible.

A law-abiding citizen would use them without hesitation, but as a mere criminal, he had to hide and be ready to flee.

The man sighed deeply and stared at the screen with dry eyes.

The screen bustled with activity. Perspectives changed, armaments clashed, magic erupted, and colorful displays burst forth.

It was the finals of Shio-ram's tournament, which made the world buzz every year around this time.

Judging by the highlights, it was a summary. The man rested his chin on his hand and watched.

"…Brings back memories."

As he watched, a peculiar feeling arose.

The man had once stood on that stage too. Competing fiercely for the top spot as one of the promising talents.

He recalled his past.

A prestigious family, enough to make him proud.

The expectations and hopes poured on him from all around.

The confidence he had in his own potential.

Fueled by all that, his blazing ambition.

A past filled with certainty and hope for the future.

"Ha…"

And suddenly, he laughed at his current miserable state.

He never imagined he'd end up like this.

Reality was a mess, a truly shitty situation.

As he hung his head and chuckled alone for a while, the screen changed.

– Thump!

His heart pounded violently. The sight of fierce flames and waves clashing on the screen made him stop laughing and look up.

A peculiar figure was captured on the screen.

Eyes closed as if blind.

An empty left arm, missing as if discarded somewhere.

A frail body that looked like it could collapse at a single blow.

He looked like a high-class gigolo but also like someone who should be receiving disability benefits.

Yet, contrary to his appearance, he moved nimbly, rampaging across the waterlogged stage with agility.

"Is it that guy?"

Even while hiding in this secluded shady place, news still reached his ears.

Shio-ram's special admission student.

A figure who received much expectation and hope from those untroubled by misfortune.

A figure who was met with wariness from the trash around him, with talk of needing to nip him in the bud.

– Thump… Whoosh!

“Hah…”

His heart pounded again, and a flame flared up inside him, making him sigh lightly.

Seeing it react, it wasn’t just noise after all.

Though his reaction was more of twisted anticipation than wariness.

He shook his head and took a cigarette from his pocket, putting it in his mouth.

Whoosh… He sparked a flame at his fingertip and brought it to the cigarette.

– Whoosh!

The flame suddenly flared up, incinerating the cigarette without leaving a trace.

“Damn it.”

The man grimaced and looked down at his chest. The damn thing caused him to lose control of the fire.

‘Shit, that was my last cigarette.’

The man ruffled his hair and stood up. The screen changed again. At the bottom of the screen, the caption ‘Finals’ appeared.

He turned his head towards the screen. In the center of the stage, flames and waves clashed fiercely.

“……”

The man’s eyes bore into the screen.

As time passed, the flames and waves receded, and the mist that formed as they tore into each other gradually settled.

And then.

Hong Yeon-hwa, with a fierce expression as if she could kill a few people, appeared on the screen.

The man chuckled and shook his head, turning away.

“Still as fiery as ever.”

The light from the communication device illuminated the back of the man as he turned away.

His fiery red hair stood out, even in the dark abandoned factory.

CHAPTER 119
SILENT

A dormitory is a facility that provides lodging and meals for members of a group.

Shio-ram provides its cadets with top-notch dormitory facilities for free.

I also received a dormitory.

The facilities were incomparable to any hotel I knew.

However, I hardly ever used it.

I rarely visited the attached facilities of the dormitory.

I seldom went to the cafeteria, just occasionally once every two days, forcing myself to visit for nutrition.

My dorm room was similar.

I didn't bring in any other products or pack any special belongings.

If compared to when I first received it, the dormitory looked almost unchanged.

I didn't sleep often in the dormitory either.

Mostly due to nightmares. Or even if I could sleep, I often spent nights in the library or personal training room because I had no time.

Also, during the midterm evaluation, I never visited my dorm room. Showering was easily done with magic, so there was no need.

During the written test, I was in the library, and after the preliminary round of the tournament, I woke up in Hong Yeon-hwa's dormitory.

Now that the main tournament was over.

I regained consciousness in my teacher's arms.

At this point, it seemed like I didn't need a dormitory.

'……'

There was no need to use observation.

Just by the sensation and warmth that enveloped me, I could immediately tell who it was.

I could also feel the gaze fixed on the top of my head.

I had an idea where I was, but just to be sure, I turned my observation to the surroundings.

As expected, it wasn't the dormitory. It wasn't even the dormitory building.

It was a two-story detached house with a yard. Judging by the exterior, it seemed to be a housing facility provided to professors.

In other words, this was my teacher's residence.

It was a rather embarrassing situation, but having had numerous experiences of changing locations after falling asleep, I managed to stay calm.

Embraced in a warm hug, I calmly retraced my memories.

I met Elia's family and, swallowing my tension, went to find my teacher.

To be honest, I was afraid.

In the duel with Baek Ahrin, I thought I did my best within my abilities.

I used Homogenization without employing Gop-hwa or Changhae, and I used Ever-changing Swordsmanship to learn and mimic Baek Ahrin's martial arts.

I conjured magic by racking my brain and used still immature spirit magic as support.

I fought hard, and in the end, I lost.

I wasn't too disappointed. I had expected to lose. Rather, I was surprised at how intense the battle had been.

Baek Ahrin seemed to be going easy or using techniques in a somewhat orthodox manner, which contributed to it.

Anyway, I gained a lot from the process.

I was able to fully absorb the operation methods of Changhae shown by Baek Ahrin, and I learned techniques using water energy or cold.

If I handle Changhae in a manner similar to its normal unique ability 'Suryu,' it will be even more powerful.

For me, it was a satisfying result. Though I lost and had to spend a day with Baek Ahrin, I didn't mind much.

But from a teacher's perspective, it could be different.

Especially since my teacher had many high expectations for me at the beginning of the semester… Would I get scolded for being eliminated in the round of 16? I worried.

I was scared.

Imagining those warm, caring eyes filled with disappointment, glaring coldly… Just the thought took my breath away.

I didn’t want to go. But I couldn’t run away, so I went.

And my teacher comforted me.

The action that washed away my fear and worry all at once relaxed me, and I fell asleep spontaneously.

That was the entirety of my memory.

‘…Nothing special.’

After thinking for a moment, it really was nothing special. I just acted childishly with my teacher and fell asleep, being moved.

If it’s my teacher, it’s okay. She cherishes me and acts as a guardian.

I buried my face back into my teacher’s embrace.

Then, above me, I heard a soft laugh, and a gentle hand stroked my head.

“You woke up early. How does your body feel?”

[I’m fine.]

[Good.]

The soft and warm sensation spread through my body, making me naturally relax.

[Happy]

[Relaxed]

As long as I was in my teacher’s embrace, my body and mind naturally relaxed, distancing me from the complex and fearful issues of destruction and lifespan.

It might just be an escape from reality, but it felt like my mental strength was

recovering.

I continued to be comforted for a while.

.

.

.

I curiously looked around my teacher's residence.

A two-story house with a yard.

The second floor had guest rooms, a study, and a workshop, all in relatively small rooms.

The bedroom where my teacher and I had slept was also located in a corner of the second floor.

Descending the stairs, there was a spacious living room.

Morning sunlight streamed through large windows, creating a bright atmosphere without needing additional lights.

There was also a well-equipped kitchen, several multi-purpose rooms, and everything one would expect on the first floor.

'No particular decorations.'

After looking around, it felt spacious. Reflecting my teacher's preferences, it was clean without many decorations.

My teacher had gone to the shower a little while ago, sending me to the living room.

'Should I cook something for her?'

The refrigerator was packed with ingredients. Various vegetables, fish, meat, and many sauces and seasonings were fully stocked.

They hadn't been touched. Even checking with observation, it was a relief there were no problems.

Though I wasn't particularly skilled in cooking, I could handle simple home meals.

Honestly, I had a small desire to cook for my teacher and receive praise.

But the problem was my tongue and nose, which couldn't taste, and the absence of one hand.

Though a bit worried, maybe I could substitute with the Power of Observation and Wings of the Sky…

'Ah, right.'

While fiddling with tools in the kitchen, a thought struck me, and I tapped the hologram projector hanging around my neck.

[Contact: Baek Ahrin (3)]

▸Baek Ahrin: Notice! The loser must fulfill the promise!

▸Baek Ahrin: Be at (location) by 12 o'clock!

▸Baek Ahrin: We'll have lunch together, and you can wear whatever you like~

The first message was from Baek Ahrin.

As discussed right after the duel, I had promised to spend today with Baek Ahrin.

I tilted my head in curiosity.

Even when I asked why she wanted to meet, or why she had to make a bet to meet, Baek Ahrin only smiled ambiguously and didn't answer clearly.

'…She won't do anything strange, will she?'

Before considering personal trust, this was Shio-ram.

No internal schemes, no external invasions had ever succeeded in this fortress of security.

A space where I could live with relative peace of mind.

The more I lived here, the more I thought the name 'cradle' suited it well.

If we liken the cadets to young sprouts or babies, the cradle was the optimal place to guide them safely and correctly.

'I wish I could meet the Tower of Growth master… huh?'

While thinking that, I noticed the number 99+ below Baek Ahrin's three messages.

99+. Meaning there were over 99 unread messages.

'Why so many?'

It was utterly bewildering. Few people knew my number, and most spam messages should go into the spam folder…

I hurriedly called up the message history.

[Contact: Elia Slade (4)]

▸Elia Slade: My parents left happily after our conversation.

▸Elia Slade: It's thanks to you visiting, Hayul. Thank you!

▸Elia Slade: I'll repay you next time for sure!

▸Elia Slade: (Saluting chick emoji)

A message from Elia. It was a fitting, back-and-forth kind of message.

I sent an appropriate reply and checked the history again.

[Contact: Liana Velus (7)]

▸Liana Velus: Cadet Lee Hayul, you worked hard during the midterm evaluation! ξ(ノ))･∇･)ミ乃

▸Liana Velus: There may be some regrets, but let's continue to work hard and achieve better results!

…

▸Liana Velus: I plan to focus on teaching spirit magic to Cadets Lee Hayul and Elia during the gap period before vacation!

▸Liana Velus: I've coordinated the schedule with Professor Atra, so please confirm!

▸Liana Velus: (Gap period schedule.mng)

A message from Professor Liana.

It was as she had mentioned before.

The midterm evaluation was over, and soon vacation would come. The period right after the midterm and before vacation is commonly called the gap period.

During this period, the academy tends to give cadets a bit more freedom.

In short, there are fewer lectures, giving more free time.

A few weeks ago, both Elia and I had nodded in agreement to Professor

Liana's suggestion to learn spirit magic for a short time during this period.

From my perspective, there was no reason to refuse direct teachings from Professor Liana, who excelled in spirit magic.

'So, I'll learn briefly before vacation.'

I had keenly felt the usefulness of spirit magic during the duel with Baek Ahrin.

I didn't use it like a true spirit mage but only as support, yet it helped immensely.

Without spirit magic, I would have been much more taxed in various ways.

Nodding my head, I continued to check the message history.

There were a few minor contacts.

There were replies from the association about arranging compensation schedules, and a few short congratulations on the main tournament from cadets I had a bit of acquaintance with.

A message from Aidan asking, "How did you mimic that?" and filled with wonder and astonishment even made me chuckle a bit.

There weren't that many messages. Not enough to reach over 99 unread messages.

'?'

The finger scrolling down the history stopped abruptly at one point.

[Contact: Hong Yeon-hwa (99+)]

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Hayul

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: What did Baek Ahrin say right before the duel?

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: She didn’t say anything strange, right?

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: If she says anything weird, just ignore her.

…

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Hayul, where are you now?

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Hayul?

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Hayul?

…

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: (Missed call (0:01:39))

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Hayul

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Where are you now

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Why aren’t you answering?

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Is something wrong?

…

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: (Missed call (0:02:10))

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: ?

…

“…?”

Over 99 messages and missed calls from a single contact.

The oldest record was from last evening, and the most recent was from an hour or two ago.

I gaped in surprise.

It was shocking that there were over 100 unread messages.

'What's going on?'

I was also puzzled.

If there were so many messages and calls, I should have noticed.

At the very least, I should have felt the vibration since the device was attached to me.

Even if I become hard of hearing when I fall asleep in someone's arms, I wouldn't ignore such periodic alarms.

I hurriedly tapped the hologram and went into the alarm settings.

[Alarm Settings]

[Alarm Sound: OFF]

└[Sound Settings: Default]

└[Volume: 0]

[Vibration: OFF]

└[Vibration Strength: 0]

'Huh?'

I found all the alarm and vibration settings turned off.

A question mark popped up above my head.

‘Why is it off? Even if I turn off the sound in public places, I always keep the vibration on… ’

It was an odd situation in many ways. Tilting my head repeatedly, I quickly tapped the hologram.

This wasn’t the time to ponder. I had to send a message to Hong Yeon-hwa, assuring her that everything was fine.

I quickly moved my fingers to type.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affinity]

Lee Hayul → Atra Clyde

●●●●●●●●○○(83▷84/100)

[Teacher] [Expectation] [Sense of Security] [Craving Affection]

[You did not meet the condition to dispel the “Curse of Silence”]

[You did not meet the condition to dispel the “Curse of Loneliness”]

CHAPTER 120
JUST HOLDING HANDS (1)

Atra, who had been active on the front lines, knew the importance of cleanliness.

Of course, a superhuman body doesn't easily catch minor illnesses even in such environments, but morale drops, and physical performance declines just the same.

Moreover, in a dirty and filthy environment, if a monster with the unique ability to handle plague or poison crawls in, you could be wiped out before even fighting.

There have indeed been such cases.

For example, the Alpha-tier monster, Twin-headed Poison Dragon, that appeared in old China.

It was an Alpha-tier monster, a colossal beast, but what devastated the vast territory of China was its nature of spreading plague and poison.

Additionally, the extremely dirty surroundings helped it.

Anyway.

Because of that, Atra was quite meticulous about cleanliness.

– Ugh…

After that incident, she became even more particular about cleanliness.

The tremendous psychological shock hit Atra hard, and since then, she hadn't touched a cigarette.

Even before bringing Lee Hayul into her place, she ventilated the room several times and used magical items imbued with purification magic to rid the place of any lingering odors.

She also paid particular attention to washing herself, especially the part of her chest where Lee Hayul often snuggled.

– Tap

As Atra tapped the hologram, the water streaming from the ceiling stopped abruptly.

She dried herself with a towel and put on the loungewear she had prepared, stepping out of the shower.

The warm, humid air filled with milky steam poured out, and the relatively cool air outside hit Atra's skin.

Towel-drying her hair, she headed towards her room.

– Tap-tap-tap-tap.

"Hm?"

Atra's footsteps halted as she headed towards her room.

The sound of something being regularly tapped, the sizzle of something cooking, and the aroma of food wafted through the air.

Blinking for a moment, Atra turned around without even fully drying her hair.

She went down to the living room.

There, she saw Lee Hayul busily moving around, occupying the kitchen.

"…?"

Lee Hayul was chopping food on a cutting board with one hand.

On the other side.

The artifact known as Heavenly Raiment, which floated around Lee Hayul or draped over him like a cape, was split into multiple parts, adjusting the frying pan, holding a spatula, and tongs to cook the food.

Additionally, a fire spirit hovered around, seemingly controlling the heat around the frying pan.

"……"

It was quite a unique sight. It reminded her of the performance-like cooking shows by superhuman chefs she had heard about.

As Atra stood there blankly, Lee Hayul noticed her presence and turned his head.

Wearing a white apron, Lee Hayul opened his mouth, then lowered his eyes apologetically.

[Did you finish washing?]

[I'm sorry.]

[Please wait a moment.]

[It's almost done.]

"Th-that's fine."

Not knowing what to say, Atra stammered a reply.

A moment later.

As Lee Hayul had said, the cooking finished soon, and plates were set on the dining table.

[I made something simple.]

Lee Hayul explained, peeking over the seated Atra's shoulder.

Atra looked at the dining table.

On a white plate, freshly cooked, steaming food was set.

Perfectly grilled, appetizing bacon and sausages.

Scrambled eggs with a golden sheen and small fried eggs, hash browns.

On another plate, there was a dressed salad and bread, seemingly for sandwiches.

"……"

"I made it simple." As he said, it was a menu suitable for a simple breakfast.

Atra, who was from the British region, used to have such a breakfast frequently when she was young.

When she was young.

Before attending the academy… she used to have such breakfasts with her family.

Atra, who was staring blankly at the food, turned her head to look at Lee Hayul.

He wasn't even sitting across from her but was instead hovering around her with an expression filled with expectation and worry.

Noticing what that meant, Atra carefully picked up a sausage with her fork.

She chewed for a moment. The sausage crumbled in her mouth, releasing its unique savor.

It wasn't too greasy, nor was it overcooked. It wasn't undercooked either.

It was just right, as if tailored to Atra's taste.

"It's delicious…"

"……!"

Delicious.

A brief, unadorned compliment made the tension and expectation in Lee Hayul's emotions burst into pure joy, and he beamed.

That smile looked as if a sunflower had fully bloomed, radiating pure happiness.

Atra could clearly see that smile.

The pure, childlike joy from a mere brief compliment.

'…Oh dear.'

She almost sighed but stopped herself, remembering yesterday's events.

However, she couldn't suppress the sigh rising inside her.

'How am I supposed to teach him… '

Teaching how to fight was a very simple task.

Atra felt that keenly once again…

* * *

The place where I was supposed to meet Baek Ahrin was in front of the central fountain in the commercial district.

As the name suggests, the commercial district is filled with various

restaurants, entertainment facilities, and large shopping malls you'd find in a bustling area.

The meeting time was 12 o'clock.

I arrived at the fountain at 11:30, 30 minutes early.

After wandering around for a bit, I plopped down on a bench near the fountain and observed my surroundings with the Power of Observation.

'…Quite a lot of people?'

As always with Shio-ram, the facilities were massive and excellent, but there were few people.

It was to be expected since there were inherently few people inside Shio-ram.

Staff members, academic personnel.

Cadets enrolled in Shio-ram.

Industry workers and their families who maintained the commercial district, that was it.

But now, there were quite a few people.

It wasn't as densely packed as a bustling city, but there were enough people around to give an impression of a crowd.

It was the first weekend after the midterm evaluation ended.

Cadets had poured into the commercial district to relieve the accumulated academic stress.

Most were wearing casual clothes instead of cadet uniforms, but I could recognize familiar faces from previous encounters, either classmates or

senior students.

It wasn't only the cadets who poured out.

There were many staff members who had been pushed to plan and conduct the midterm evaluation and other academic schedules.

With them joining in, the presence of people was quite noticeable.

'Hmm… '

There were quite a few people wandering around.

Naturally, many glances and whispers were directed at me… but by now, I was used to such attention and it didn't bother me.

In the past, I would have run home immediately… I suddenly felt proud of how far I've come.

Sitting on the bench, I swung my legs and waited for Baek Ahrin to arrive.

'Sigh… '

Thinking of Baek Ahrin, I recalled the advice? given by Hong Yeon-hwa and my teacher about today's meeting.

The countless missed calls from Hong Yeon-hwa.

I quickly informed her of my well-being, startled by the sheer number of missed calls.

Her reply came swiftly.

She asked if anything had happened because she was worried when I didn't answer.

Thus began our conversation.

I had fallen asleep and didn't notice because it was on silent. I apologized.

She was worried but relieved that nothing happened. Did you sleep in the dormitory?

I fell asleep at my teacher's residence.

…Why were you there? Did something happen? etc…

We chatted for a bit, and the topic eventually shifted to the promise I made with Baek Ahrin.

Since I had many questions myself, it was a welcomed conversation.

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: If she does anything weird, punch her right away.

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Don't hesitate, there's no need to hold back.

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Got it?

I didn't get much out of it. Just the obvious and sensible advice to reject any weird advances.

Hong Yeon-hwa also seemed unsure why Baek Ahrin made such a bet.

"—Remember this. Got it? What did I say?"

[If someone tries to touch me, punch them right away…]

[Teacher]

[I know this too…]

"…Really? Then why do you stay still when I touch you?"

[Because it's you, Teacher]

[It's fine if it's you]

"…I-I see."

Before leaving the residence, I received similar advice? from my teacher.

Honestly, it was baffling. Why keep emphasizing something everyone knows?

But since it was out of concern from Hong Yeon-hwa and my teacher, I nodded appropriately.

Swinging my legs and browsing through magical books on the hologram, it wasn't even 10 minutes later.

I noticed Baek Ahrin at the edge of my observation range.

Soon, among the many presences, I heard the clicking of her steps approaching the fountain.

Baek Ahrin's gaze found me as she surveyed the surroundings.

She smiled brightly and walked towards me in strides.

"Oh my. I came out 20 minutes early, but I'm still late."

[It's fine.]

[I just got here too.]

I shook my head at Baek Ahrin, who asked while awkwardly fixing her hair, and observed her outfit.

As always, her blue hair was neatly tied back.

A clean, plain white T-shirt with no decorations.

A denim jacket over it, complementing her long legs clad in jeans.

The outfit itself wasn't special, but her excellent figure made it look even better.

“Did you have lunch?”

[Huh?]

[Didn’t you say we’d eat together?]

“Oh, you remembered well.”

Baek Ahrin said with a grin and suddenly held out her hand to me.

“?”

Tilting my head for a moment, I realized what her gesture meant and made a strange expression.

A white palm.

A dangerous hand that could conjure hundreds of ice spikes if desired.

Of course, I didn’t think she’d actually unleash them here.

This was inside Shio-ram, so I wasn’t overly cautious.

Carefully reaching out, Baek Ahrin swiftly grabbed my hand.

A hand wrapped in a black arm sleeve met a bare white hand.

It wasn’t warm but cool.

– Beep

While I was feeling a peculiar sensation, Baek Ahrin’s smartwatch beeped.

A timer appeared on the small hologram.

[23:59:57]

“Alright, the 24-hour timer starts now.”

[Huh?]

When I asked what that meant, Baek Ahrin replied nonchalantly.

“I told you, I’m taking your day.”

“???”

As I tried to ask what that meant again, a thought came to mind.

A day.

The time it takes for the Earth to rotate.

And, 24 hours.

I was left gaping.

‘No way.’

A day meant that day?

As if affirming my thoughts, Baek Ahrin just shook our hands.

CHAPTER 121
JUST HOLDING HANDS (2)

When faced with utter disbelief, one can be rendered speechless.

It feels like your thoughts get chopped up, leaving you bewildered and flustered.

'…No way.'

Blinking blankly, I suddenly pouted my lips at the thought that sprang to mind.

[That's unfair.]

"Huh? Unfair?"

[No.]

[If someone says to spend a day together, it's normal to assume it means until that evening at most.]

"Um, but I clearly emphasized 'a day'…and you accepted it, Hayul…"

Baek Ahrin tilted her head nonchalantly.

It was infuriatingly unsatisfactory.

Of course, Baek Ahrin's words were filled with wordplay and unreasonable logic…

But she did emphasize 'a day' when making the promise, and I nodded without much thought.

It felt unfair in many ways. However, I couldn't just dismiss my acceptance.

After some contemplation, I projected my thoughts onto the necklace.

[But 24 hours is too long.]

[Staying up all night is exhausting.]

"Hmm?"

[There's nothing to do all night anyway.]

[Wouldn't it be better to just play for a while and part ways?]

I changed my approach.

Instead of expressing my dissatisfaction, I opted to persuade.

Thinking calmly, I concluded that Baek Ahrin probably didn't intend to spend the full 24 hours playing around.

Maybe she just wanted to tease me. In fact, her expression had a mischievous look.

Taking on a persuasive attitude, I saw Baek Ahrin's expression subtly change as if I had guessed correctly.

Her blinking eyes glanced over my face.

After scrutinizing me several times, Baek Ahrin seemed to realize something and opened her mouth, looking blank.

"…Pfft."

Then, suddenly, she burst into a slight giggle.

Eventually, she covered her mouth with her hand, trying to suppress her laughter.

Even with her mouth covered, I could clearly feel the corners of her lips rising through my observation.

“In some ways, you really are like a child.”

“?”

And then she said something strange out of the blue.

[I’m not a child…]

Lately, I seemed to be receiving a lot of unwarranted slander from those around me.

My personality might be a bit… childish, but it’s not to the extent of such comparisons… I think.

I shook my head firmly, but Baek Ahrin just kept giggling and pulled my hand as she urged me to walk.

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Eventually, led by Baek Ahrin, I found myself walking.

Amidst the waves of presences from all around, the clicking footsteps right beside me were distinctly audible.

“Oh, right.”

While walking towards our destination, Baek Ahrin suddenly took out a plastic bag from her subspace pouch.

The bag contained something small.

White as snow, shiny on the outside, and long…

[Garaetteok?]

“Yes, Garaetteok.”

It was Garaetteok.

Tilting my head at the sudden sight, Baek Ahrin skillfully took out a piece of Garaetteok with one hand from the plastic bag and handed it to me.

“It’s for you to eat. You must be hungry since you haven’t had a meal, right? Have a snack before we go to the restaurant.”

‘Why Garaetteok all of a sudden?’

White Garaetteok. When we gathered to study last time, there were traditional snacks like Yakgwa, and Baek Ahrin often munched on red ginseng candy…

I couldn’t shake off the impression of Baek Ahrin’s peculiar taste.

With a strange expression, I tried to free my hand to receive the Garaetteok. Having only one hand, it was inevitable.

“?”

I couldn’t free it. Baek Ahrin gripped my hand even tighter.

– Squeeze

Instead, the Garaetteok pressed against my lips.

Though it was in a plastic bag, it felt warm and soft as if freshly made.

“This kind of thing is meant to be fed by someone else. Now, open wide.”

[I can eat it myself.]

“Tsk, tsk.”

I tried to manipulate the Wings of the Sky floating behind me, but for some odd reason, it didn’t work.

Baek Ahrin’s demeanor clearly indicated she intended to tease me further.

I glanced around. Among the bustling crowd, many glances were directed our way, even if they pretended not to look.

The gazes were filled with various emotions… especially surprise, curiosity, and amazement.

Even though I had gotten used to many eyes on me, I didn’t want to do something peculiar in such a situation.

Reluctantly, I composed my strange expression and opened my mouth.

Then, the Garaetteok was pushed into my mouth.

The long Garaetteok brushed against my palate and tapped my cheek.

I closed my mouth.

The warm and soft sensation met my teeth, and I chewed the piece of Garaetteok.

‘Hmm… ’

Swallowing the Garaetteok.

With an ambiguous expression, I bit into the proffered Garaetteok again.

Chewing… swallowing.

‘Hmm… ’

I had rarely eaten Garaetteok, but I knew it was typically eaten with sugar or

honey.

Because the plain Garaetteok doesn't have much flavor.

Although it has a unique savoriness, it's quite bland and plain to eat alone.

This didn't matter to me now. Due to the curse, I couldn't taste anything, whether it was honey or sugar.

– Chew, chew…

'…Not bad.'

Garaetteok inherently doesn't have a strong flavor.

Even before, I ate plain Garaetteok just for the texture.

Even now, with the curse, I could still feel the texture, making it somewhat enjoyable.

"How is it?"

As I kept chewing, Baek Ahrin, who was feeding me the Garaetteok while walking beside me, asked.

She shook the Garaetteok in her hand.

"It's okay without sugar or honey, right?"

After a moment of thought, I nodded, and Baek Ahrin smiled as if she expected that reaction.

"Now that we've had a snack to fill our stomachs… let's visit the art gallery before the restaurant."

[Art gallery?]

"Yes. There are several art galleries in the commercial district. I hope it's not

too much trouble, but have you ever been to an art gallery, Hayul?”

[No.]

Of course, I had seen them on the internet, but I had never visited one myself.

“Then may I take you there this time?”

[Sure.]

[That’s fine.]

“Great. Thank you. I can resolve a bit of my curiosity this time.”

[Curiosity about what?]

As she led me, Baek Ahrin answered.

“How does your sensory ability interpret artworks?”

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We arrived at one of the art galleries within Shio-ram.

A building constructed with white stone.

There weren’t many people.

Well, considering the various entertainments outside, not many would visit an art gallery.

A red carpet indicated the path, guiding visitors through the gallery.

Still holding my hand, Baek Ahrin walked along the carpet, viewing the artworks.

It was quiet, perhaps due to the lack of people, and the gallery maintaining a hushed atmosphere.

“How does it feel? How do you perceive it with your senses?”

‘Hic.’

In such an atmosphere.

Baek Ahrin, seemingly aware of the need to maintain silence, leaned in and whispered in my ear.

Each time, her breath teased my ear, making my body involuntarily tighten.

If I hadn’t controlled my senses, I would have squirmed on the floor like a fish.

[It tickles.]

Shaking my head away from the tickling breath.

Baek Ahrin giggled and pointed to one side.

“Sorry. Your reaction was too cute. But I’m genuinely curious. How does that feel to you, Hayul?”

Seeing my pouting expression, she offered a genuine apology.

Though I was still displeased, I nodded, indicating I understood, and turned my observation towards where she pointed.

A frame on the wall contained a picture with black and white squares and a grey line between them.

‘That one.’

It was a famous picture, even seen in my previous world.

The grey horizontal line between the black and white squares is undoubtedly parallel but appears inclined.

A picture that felt fascinating even when viewed through a monitor.

[It feels normal.]

“Really?”

It didn’t feel the same as before.

There’s a huge variety of artworks, each displaying a wide range of artistic expressions.

The gallery I visited with Baek Ahrin specialized in optical illusions.

True to its theme, the gallery displayed artworks that trick the eye.

A room with geometric patterns that seemed to move.

A statue whose facial expression changed depending on the viewer’s perspective.

A video where a man seemed to run backward when stared at directly but forward when glanced at.

[It just feels like a complex pattern.]

[The inside is made by mixing plaster and clay, and the outer decoration is copper.]

[This picture… seems to use cow’s blood as dye.]

It didn’t apply to me.

As far as I know, there are various reasons behind optical illusions.

Mainly, physiological illusions caused by the eyes processing images, and cognitive illusions resulting from the brain's attempts to conserve resources, causing errors.

There are many other detailed reasons, but they didn't apply to me.

I wasn't viewing the world through my eyes, thanks to the Power of Observation.

Observation.

Not just a replacement for sight, but a power to gather information about what is observed.

Hence, I am less prone to illusions, hallucinations, or visual tricks.

Furthermore, not just visual illusions, but illusions and security magic can all be disregarded.

"Hayul's sensory ability is indeed unique."

Baek Ahrin murmured, waving her finger while listening to my explanation.

"Reading colors, shades, and replacing vision. The detection range easily exceeds kilometers, and it functions normally even in a raging dungeon with high precision. The ability to penetrate illusions and security elements? And it's still in the early stages of development?"

Counting on her fingers, Baek Ahrin shook her head in amazement.

"Every faction must desperately want a sensory ability user like you."

Despite Baek Ahrin's admiration, I merely nodded without surprise.

'Well, it's a power, so it should be exceptional.'

In terms of rank, it's on par with the powers wielded by the masters of the

Tower of Growth, Eternal Winter, Purgatory, and Necromancy.

I can't use it properly yet due to my low level.

Eventually, if I reach the appropriate level, I might be able to use it continent-wide like the 'Observer'.

'Thanks to it, cooking was incredibly easy.'

This incredible power helped me cook for my teacher this morning.

Without smell and taste, distinguishing between salt and sugar was difficult.

Unable to differentiate by smell or taste.

Even if I could barely distinguish by sight, my blindness made it more challenging.

But with observation, it's simple.

Not just a replacement for vision, but analyzing information takes more resources but allows me to easily distinguish.

It helped a lot during cooking.

I could precisely match the ratio of seasonings and cooking time, monitoring the cooking progress in real-time.

Honestly, I doubted it would work at first, but it turned out much better than before.

The influence of being a Jack of All Trades was significant.

Cooking skills are part of being a Jack of All Trades, making it simpler, faster, and tastier than before.

Although it was a simple breakfast menu… making a more complex and time-consuming dish would probably show a difference.

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Time passed.

The bright morning sunlight dimmed, and the well-maintained ground was bathed in a deep orange sunset.

It wasn't dark yet, but the streetlights were starting to activate in preparation.

Moreover, the crowd had not decreased but increased.

Perhaps due to pubs that were unpopular in the morning preparing to start their main business.

"How was it so far? Were you satisfied?"

As I surveyed the surroundings with observation.

Baek Ahrin, also surveying the surroundings, asked.

Her gentle smile and curious eyes made me recall the past few hours.

Visually analyzing the fascinating memories of the art gallery, though not particularly impressive.

Memories of wandering through a department store filled with various products I had never seen before.

Chewing traditional dishes from different countries I couldn't taste but found texturally decent.

[Yes.]

Cool but now somewhat familiar, the soft touch of her hand.

[It was satisfying.]

At least I didn't regret coming out.

"That's a relief."

Baek Ahrin, who had been watching for my answer, sighed in relief.

Then, with a chuckle, she spoke.

"Well then, it's time for the final course."

Final course. With those words, Baek Ahrin led me again.

Having grown accustomed to her guidance, I followed without discomfort, checking the time subtly.

6 PM.

Not too late.

I sighed in relief inwardly.

Mentioning 24 hours was indeed a joke.

'Maybe we'll have dinner and part ways, or see something and then part ways?'

That would be perfect timing.

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[What is this?]

I tilted my head at the building before me.

A massive dome-shaped structure with a roof. It was so large, almost comparable to a football stadium.

The most peculiar feature was the densely packed magic stones and magical wards inside the rounded structure.

Other buildings had wards embedded for security and protection, but not to this extent.

Moreover, despite its size, there was no sign of activity inside.

“You’ll know once we go in.”

At my curious inquiry, Baek Ahrin smiled meaningfully and urged me inside.

Reluctantly, I followed Baek Ahrin into the building.

The first-floor lobby was deserted.

Unperturbed, Baek Ahrin scanned something with her smartwatch at the desk kiosk, then led me through a large door inside the desk area.

The door opened to reveal stairs.

‘What is this?’

There were quite a lot of stairs. It was a very significant facility.

By now, my curiosity was piqued, but I didn’t use observation to scan the interior.

The stairs led to another large door.

Finally, arriving there, Baek Ahrin opened the door wide.

Was this the final destination?

Conscious of my rising curiosity, I directed my observation inside the opening door.

A rounded ceiling, as I suspected from the outside dome.

And beneath it.

A massive bed stood alone in the center.

"?"

A question mark floated above my head.

* * *

Lee Hayul → Baek Ahrin

●●●●●●○○○○(60▷63/100)

[Affinity] [Curiosity] [Confusion]

…

[You did not meet the condition to dispel the "Curse of Silence"]

[You did not meet the condition to dispel the "Curse of Loneliness"]

CHAPTER 122
JUST HOLDING HANDS (3)

The facility was almost the size of a football stadium.

The dome covering the ceiling of the building was densely packed with magical inscriptions, and there were very few signs of life inside.

At least with my current knowledge, I couldn't deduce what this building was for.

Following Baek Ahrin with a sense of expectation, I walked inside.

In the center of the facility, a rectangular bed stood alone.

"?"

The interior was unexpected. I couldn't make sense of it.

Trying to stay calm, I looked around again.

To be precise, the bed wasn't the only thing there.

Next to the bed were a small wooden chest and a mini-fridge.

And that was it.

"Come, come this way."

Just as I was about to observe the contents of the chest, Baek Ahrin pulled my hand and led me towards the bed.

The bed was enormous.

The standard bed in the dormitory was already quite large compared to my build, but this bed seemed to be at least four times larger.

Exaggerating a bit, even if ten Lee Hayuls lay side by side, there would still be room.

Tilting my head, I shook Baek Ahrin's arm slightly.

[What is this?]

[Why is there a bed?]

[What kind of facility is this?]

The Necklace of Confession rattled off questions. Glancing at the rattling necklace, Baek Ahrin shrugged her shoulders.

"You'll find out soon enough. Because…"

Before I knew it, we were right in front of the bed.

"You're going to experience it firsthand… Now."

[Huh?]

Baek Ahrin pulled our clasped hands, pushing me onto the bed.

She didn't throw me, just gave a gentle push.

There was no malice in her action.

My guard was down, and I was easily pushed.

My knees hit the bed, and I collapsed onto it, sitting down.

"Good. Move a bit further in."

[???]

The soft feel of the bed's cushion was clearly transmitted to my hips. Before I could react, I was pushed again, lying flat on the bed.

"Hup…"

I ended up lying on the large bed.

After pushing me onto the bed, Baek Ahrin took off her jean jacket, casually draping it over the nearby chest, and lay down next to me.

"Wow, this is really soft. They brought in some high-quality stuff… Is it uncomfortable?"

[No.]

[It's fine.]

"Here. Have some water."

[Thank you.]

There was some distance between us.

After checking the bed, Baek Ahrin asked about my condition, and I nodded reluctantly.

I fiddled with the water bottle for a moment before opening it and taking a sip.

Cool water flowed into my parched mouth.

"……"

Swallowing the water, I thought for a moment.

I hadn't deciphered the magical inscriptions on the ceiling yet, but various thoughts came rushing to my mind as we reached this point.

Among them were some thoughts too improper to share with others.

A large but oddly placed bed in a secluded room…

The setting fueled certain imaginations.

They were thoughts I could never share with anyone.

Also, they were ridiculous fantasies that were immediately dismissed.

Baek Ahrin had no reason to act that way.

I didn't know much about Baek Ahrin as a person, but logically speaking, it didn't make sense.

How long had we known each other? A year, two years? Even after such a long time, it's hard to understand what's in someone's heart.

It was a foolish thought. It was so stupid that I felt my face flush.

To hide my face, I buried it in the nearby pillow.

'Phew, so soft… '

Momentarily stiffening at the unexpected softness, I realized the bed's support was extraordinary. No wonder Baek Ahrin admired its quality.

"If you're tired, you can lie down. Just relax and keep your ears open~"

[Huh?]

Noticing my actions, Baek Ahrin chuckled and tapped on her smartwatch.

Keep my ears open, what did that mean?

I tilted my head in confusion.

– Wuuuu…

My body shivered.

There was no sound. It wasn't a type of movement that produced sound.

The rounded ceiling.

Magic started to fill the numerous inscriptions embedded inside, activating them.

I wasn't actively deciphering it, but with it starting to work, the meaning became clear.

There were no offensive spells. Hardly any defensive spells either.

Nor were there many spells for security or maintenance.

Two major types of inscriptions…

Just as I deciphered them.

– Thump!

"……!"

A heavy sound echoed around.

It felt like the sound was bouncing off the walls, amplifying. It was large and intense.

It almost felt like the sound was hitting my eardrums.

But my ears didn't hurt.

It was the effect of the magic.

'…Just now?'

I had heard that sound a few times before.

I didn’t know the exact name.

But I knew it was the sound of an instrument.

– Thump! Thump! Thump!

The consecutive sounds felt like the beginning of a performance.

– ♪…

And as if affirming that, the melody of various instruments started to appear.

All kinds of sounds filled my ears. Different instruments seemed to tickle my ears and tap my eardrums.

The sound was very stimulating and grand.

With only the bed, chest, and fridge in the space, the various instrument sounds spread easily throughout the wide area.

“……”

I rubbed my ears blankly.

Since my senses had amplified, I often got startled by sudden loud sounds.

I knew how to sharpen my senses, but handling the aftermath was my responsibility.

Even with normal hearing, loud and stimulating sounds could be overwhelming.

Amplified hearing made it feel like my skull was throbbing with pain.

But not now.

The stimulating and heavy sounds filled my ears and tapped my eardrums, transmitting to my head, but it wasn’t burdensome.

‘Magic.’

One of the two types of inscriptions on the ceiling.

It was a type of magic I hadn’t studied in-depth… one that finely manipulates sound.

‘Ah.’

I realized.

A spacious yet empty room.

A lone bed.

Magic that finely manipulates sound.

‘This facility is for that.’

This was a concert hall.

A facility designed and built to enjoy the magic-imbued sounds.

– Tap, tap

At that moment.

Baek Ahrin, who was also enjoying the music, suddenly tapped my shoulder.

Turning my head, curious, I saw Baek Ahrin chuckle.

“I told you it would be fine, didn’t I?”

Her voice was clear amidst the various sounds.

As if she expected me to like it.

I didn’t feel the need to object. I genuinely enjoyed the melody filling my

ears.

Nodding blankly, Baek Ahrin smiled, satisfied, and projected a hologram.

“Your sensory ability gathers information within a certain range. It doesn’t collect information outside that range… Right?”

She had explained this before.

Baek Ahrin manipulated the hologram.

“I hope you like this too.”

– Wuuuu…

The movement of magic in the ceiling could be felt.

The second half of the inscriptions, which hadn’t been activated, started to work.

Magic filled the rather complex inscriptions, manifesting spells.

“……”

The ceiling was painted black.

It reminded me of a pitch-black universe without a single star.

– Sparkle

Lights suddenly appeared in that darkness.

There were bright yellow lights, faint blue lights, and sparkling red lights.

But most were just blue and white lights.

Countless white lights were etched into the black ceiling.

At first, there were one or two… then ten… suddenly surpassing a hundred, and then a thousand.

A dazzling display of lights filled the black ceiling.

There were so many that in one area, the tiny lights seemed to form a white river.

Countless points of light illuminating the dark space below.

'The sky.'

With the magic activated, the ceiling recreated the night sky and the universe.

.

.

.

For a while, I was in a daze.

My ears filled with the beautiful sounds of various instruments, and the ceiling displayed a night sky full of stars, showing the universe.

'The sky.'

A place I couldn't capture with my eyes closed.

Spatial awareness… I couldn't encompass the vastness of the sky.

The Power of Observation could do it if I tried.

Not just gathering information within range, but actually changing to a perspective similar to vision.

I couldn't do it now, but someday I might be able to.

But before attempting that, the universe had already unfolded in my mind.

“How is it?”

My hand itched. Wondering why, I turned my observation and saw slender fingers tickling my palm.

Lying next to me, Baek Ahrin asked while looking at me.

Her neatly tied hair was spread across the bed, catching the simulated starlight from the ceiling.

“I searched and booked this place meticulously… Do you like it?”

‘……’

I thought for a moment.

The universe wasn’t captured in my retina.

It wasn’t a sky seen with my eyes.

I wanted to see the sky with my own eyes.

Information gathered through observation wasn’t enough.

The necklace rattled.

[I like it.]

If I had come to this facility alone, I wouldn’t have liked it.

Realizing that made me feel like a childish person.

Touching my head alone didn’t evoke any feeling.

When someone who cared for me patted my head, my heart warmed, and I smiled.

Eating food alone without tasting it was unpleasant.

When someone who cherished me fed me, it was enjoyable despite the lack of taste.

Hugging a big teddy bear or covering myself with a blanket alone didn't bring much satisfaction.

Being in the arms of someone who liked me made me feel happy and cozy.

'Does Baek Ahrin… '

Cherish me?

Value me?

Like me?

I delved deep into my observation, projecting beyond Baek Ahrin's mask.

The usual expressionless face.

A cold face devoid of emotion.

'I don't know.'

The Baek Ahrin from the first timeline was a strong and reliable character who stayed by the player's side until their death.

The Baek Ahrin from the eighth timeline betrayed the player during a crucial moment while fighting the Tower Master of Eternal Winter.

She hid secrets that were never revealed in the original story.

It was a mystery.

There was nothing I could be certain about. My mind was too inexperienced, and I had little experience dealing with people, making it hard to speculate.

“It’s a relief you like it.”

Baek Ahrin smiled brightly.

Despite the cold face beneath, her mask showed a satisfied, relieved smile.

It was very confusing.

Why did her real face look so cold, while her mask was so bright?

Why did she betray in the eighth timeline but not in the first?

Would she betray me in reality?

Was her kind treatment now just an act to lower my guard…

And.

Why were the vaguely felt emotions so faint, and what was she desperately desiring?

‘I don’t know.’

Doubt and confusion.

‘But still… ’

I firmly gripped the hand I was holding. Although it was cold, it was now quite soft and familiar.

So far, Baek Ahrin had consistently shown care for me.

Even if there were selfish motives, I hoped there was at least some genuine care for me.

‘I hope she doesn’t betray me.’

If someone who cares for me ends up stabbing me in the back… it would be

heart-wrenching to even imagine.

If she wanted something, I would do my best to fulfill it, as long as she didn't betray me.

"We've booked this place until tomorrow. If you get sleepy while enjoying, you can sleep right here."

Baek Ahrin then paused and smirked.

"Don't worry. I really will just hold your hand while you sleep."

She said with a playful smile, shaking our clasped hands.

'…If you're sleepy, sleep… '

Hearing that, I felt drowsiness wash over me like Pavlov's dog.

The soft bed and the blanket now covering me up to my neck urged me to sleep.

The melody in my ears felt like a lullaby.

Baek Ahrin lay beside me.

Although recalling the eighth timeline wouldn't have brought peace of mind… within Shio-ram, I felt absolutely safe, so it wasn't threatening.

Moreover, my wariness of Baek Ahrin had significantly diminished.

My body grew heavy, and my consciousness gradually faded.

"Oh… Huh? Are you really falling asleep?"

My hand fidgeted. Instead of gripping the faintly visible thing in my hand, I let go of my consciousness.

I fell asleep.

I didn't have nightmares.

* * *

"…He really fell asleep."

The moment I told him he could sleep, his breathing evened out, and he drifted into dreamland.

Lying on the bed, Baek Ahrin blinked and turned her head.

She could clearly see Lee Hayul's peacefully sleeping face.

His face looked so innocent.

Feeling a sudden urge, she tried to poke his cheek with her finger, but her hand was tightly held.

Looking down, she saw her hand firmly gripped by Lee Hayul.

Instead of being wary, he seemed to be clinging as if asking her not to leave.

His rapidly diminishing vigilance was puzzling.

At first, he was clearly afraid of her.

Though that emotion had faded over time, Lee Hayul still seemed to have a fundamental rejection towards her.

She thought it would be very difficult to break down that barrier…

'Oh, right.'

She recalled Lee Hayul's reaction when he first saw this bed.

His face, initially filled with doubt and confusion, had suddenly turned bright red like a tomato.

It was evident what he was thinking from his blatant and pure reaction.

With a peculiar expression, Baek Ahrin opened the chest beside her and reached inside.

She pulled out a box and held it up to the light.

“It’s indeed for that purpose too.”

The box contained standard-issue contraceptives.

People did use this place for such purposes.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affinity]

Lee Hayul → Baek Ahrin

●●●●●●○○○○(63▷68/100)

[Affinity] [Curiosity] [Confusion]

…

[You did not meet the condition to dispel the “Curse of Silence”]

[You did not meet the condition to dispel the “Curse of Loneliness”]

…

[Savior Adjustment System: Evil Resistance]

[The system shows intense rejection towards Eternal Winter!]

…

[Reading the Savior’s emotions]

[Player Adjustment System: Measurement]

▸State of Mind

[Rescue]: Save those in danger.

…

[Player Adjustment System: Affinity]

Lee Hayul → Baek Ahrin

●●●●●●○○○○(68/100)

[Affinity] [Curiosity] [Confusion]

…

[System Adjusting…]

[Savior Adjustment System: Pioneering]

[Linked with Main Quest “Tower of Eternal Winter”…]

[Creating Quest “Baek Ahrin”]

…

[Savior Adjustment System: Salvation]

[When the Savior performs a rescue, the system will fully support the Savior]

CHAPTER 123
RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT PLEASURE

My eyes were closed, but my consciousness was awake.

My mind felt hazy. The bed supporting my body was soft, and the blanket covering me was exceedingly warm.

And my right hand was quite cold.

– Haaa…

Perhaps due to the lingering drowsiness, I suddenly yawned. I paid attention to not make a sound.

After successfully stifling my yawn, I closed my mouth.

My mouth felt somewhat dry upon waking up. As I smacked my lips to moisten them, I sat up.

The blanket slid off, and a familiar voice came from right beside me.

“You woke up early.”

I wriggled my fingers for a moment and activated the Power of Observation.

The round ceiling still displayed the night sky, and there was the bed placed in the center.

On that bed was me, who had just sat up…

“How are you feeling? The bed is so high-quality that your sleep must have been comfortable.”

Baek Ahrin, who had been lying in the same bed, waved her hand and spoke.

My hand moved along with hers. The hand that had become strangely familiar after holding it all night was cool to the touch.

Waking up in the same bed with someone else was quite surprising… or rather, enough to make one fall backward in shock.

"……"

After a moment of thought, I nodded.

[Yes]

[Good morning]

I was quite accustomed to it.

.

.

.

The streets on Sunday morning were quiet.

We left the facility that resembled a planetarium and walked along the streets, but we didn't meet many people.

This was partly because the area was generally not crowded, and it was early on a Sunday morning, making it even less populated.

"Oh, here it comes~"

[Table 11. Your order has arrived.]

As we were about to return to the dormitory, Baek Ahrin suggested we have breakfast together.

After a brief consideration, we entered a nearby restaurant and ordered food, which was served a while ago.

There were no other customers besides Baek Ahrin and me. Perhaps due to this, the food was served quickly.

A serving robot placed the food on the table.

Hot steam rose from the broth and the neatly arranged white noodles. Toppings and seaweed flakes were sprinkled on top…

The menu was nothing special, just banquet noodles.

Though there were other side dishes like dumplings, Baek Ahrin didn't seem to have a particular preference for them.

She asked if I wanted some dumplings, but I didn't particularly want them either.

"Let's eat~"

[Let's eat]

Baek Ahrin picked up her chopsticks. She lifted a bundle of noodles and opened her mouth.

"Aren't you eating?"

[Huh?]

I still had my chopsticks on the table. Baek Ahrin, who had paused with the noodles lifted, looked at me and then back at the chopsticks on the table.

[Oh]

[Please go ahead and eat first]

With my hands on my lap, I tilted my head and suggested she eat first.

Baek Ahrin made a peculiar expression before taking a bite of the noodles.

Seeing her chew and swallow the food, I picked up my chopsticks.

Using the chopsticks, I stirred the noodles in the broth and lifted a decent amount into my mouth.

Chewing and swallowing the noodles, I waved my chopsticks with a strange expression before lifting more noodles.

To be honest, I don't particularly like banquet noodles.

When I was hungry, I could eat anything, even bugs… But after becoming a well-fed and comfortable "pig," I became pickier.

Among the foods I avoided, banquet noodles were bland and tasteless… Even with pepper, they didn't taste particularly good.

'Not bad.'

But now, it wasn't bad. Sipping the broth, I had a similar impression to drinking warm water.

Though just warm water, it was similar to the broth I felt before in banquet noodles.

Banquet noodles typically consist of wheat flour noodles boiled in anchovy broth, so the original taste was already bland. Hence, there wasn't much discomfort or unpleasantness while eating it now.

"This place is surprisingly good despite being the first time I've been here."

[Yes]

[I think so too]

Continuously moving my chopsticks and spooning the broth, I quickly

finished the contents.

Thanks to matching Baek Ahrin's eating pace, we stood up from the table almost simultaneously.

"Shall we take a walk back to the dormitory to help with digestion?"

[Yes]

[That sounds good]

The body of a superhuman requires more food than that of a regular person.

Thus, my meal portions increased. I used to barely finish a few bites, but now I could finish a whole bowl by myself.

Rubbing my full stomach, I nodded at the suggestion to walk.

Shio-ram is vast. Though there are parks for strolling, walking back to the dormitory is a good enough walk on its own.

'I'm going back after a while.'

While walking back, we had small talk to kill time.

Holding hands and swinging our legs, I suddenly realized it had been a while since I returned to the dormitory.

During the written evaluation period, I was in the library. After the tournament preliminaries, I stayed at Hong Yeon-hwa's dormitory. After the finals ended, I stayed at my teacher's place…

Returning to the dormitory after almost a week. With basic cleansing magic in place, there shouldn't be any dust.

Once I return, I must seriously resume training.

Although it was under the pretext of mid-term evaluation, I had been quite

lax with my training.

Of course, there are things to do during the break, and considering the upcoming Trial of Growth at the start of the next semester, my specs will significantly improve then…

“Oh, right.”

My train of thought was interrupted by Baek Ahrin’s exclamation.

Turning my head out of curiosity, Baek Ahrin asked in her usual, somewhat nonchalant manner.

“Do you get a lot of talk about engagements?”

[Huh?]

Though the topic was somewhat sudden.

Engagement.

It’s a relationship where one promises to marry later, not immediately.

There could be many reasons.

It could be because the individuals are too young for marriage, or the situation is not ideal.

Or, as I think about the concept of engagement, it could be for strategic purposes.

“No, I just thought you might have received a lot of proposals because the midterms are over, and they might increase now.”

Baek Ahrin explained as she looked at me. She seemed curious about my answer, so I nodded reluctantly.

At the beginning of the semester.

Even before I proved my qualifications, I received strange messages.

We are from such-and-such family… faction… clan, and we admire your potential… Our child is also quite decent… We wish to establish a bloodline connection…

Emails filled with flowery language. At first, I thought they were spam and threw them into the trash.

But as time passed, they kept coming, even more frequently. Not just one or two, but sometimes ten a day.

Moreover, the content changed from heavy topics like engagement to lighter ones like wanting to meet.

Back then, I felt reluctant but recalled it happened in the original story.

Strategic engagement.

As far as I recall, it was a culture prevalent during the times of monarchy and aristocracy.

While not non-existent in modern times… it's not common for the boy next door and the girl from our house to have a formal engagement, right?

That's how it was in the world I originally knew.

Here, it's a bit different.

In fact, the existence of superhumans and the factions they form can rival or surpass the influence of nobility.

In reality, the concept of a nation is becoming blurry, with factions ruling regions and employing administrative personnel as needed.

Instead of South Korea, it's the Korean Peninsula or the South Korean region.

Instead of China, it's the old Chinese land…

In fact, the names China, Korea, and Japan have been used to denote regions rather than nations for quite some time.

"Indeed… Many people might assume you're already guaranteed to get engaged."

…Even the person beside me, who asked if I received messages on the first day of the semester, is the heir of a great faction.

The heir of the Changhae clan, which controls Northern Korea, Primorsky Krai, Khabarovsk, etc.

In this context, they are practically royalty or nobility. Perhaps even more powerful…

"What do you think, Hayul, about engagements?"

As I was contemplating Baek Ahrin's impressive status.

Muttering to herself, Baek Ahrin suddenly asked me that.

"……"

Her question made me stop walking.

Following my pause, Baek Ahrin looked at me with her usual blue eyes.

Engagement… While I initially dismissed it as spam, the numerous messages made me think a bit about it.

– Creak…

The Necklace of Confession rattled.

[I don't like it]

– Creak, creak…

The sound seemed like an irritating noise, similar to nails on a chalkboard.

[I don’t like it]

Baek Ahrin looked surprised at the necklace’s firm refusal.

[I don’t mean to interfere with others’ situations]

I quickly added an explanation, seeing her expression.

[It’s not that I have a complete aversion…]

[Um…]

[It’s just…]

What should I say? Feeling a peculiar urgency, I stomped my feet and came up with a suitable answer.

[It’s burdensome]

“Burdensome?”

[Yes…]

[It’s too much for me]

Being engaged, promising to marry.

Marriage, becoming a couple, and building a family.

If I get engaged, I’ll get married, and if I get married, I’ll build a family.

Then… I’ll probably have children too.

Thinking that far and envisioning myself in that situation made me feel a

crushing sense of pressure.

To put it bluntly, I lacked confidence.

I wasn't confident I could make my partner happy.

I wasn't confident I could raise children safely and happily and ensure their future happiness.

I was a mess myself.

How could I make someone happy, raise, and teach them?

If I couldn't solve the curse, I was just a ticking time bomb…

"I see. It's understandable. Honestly, feeling burdened at this age is normal."

'Oh.'

Realizing, I hurriedly checked the necklace.

Somehow, I ended up blurting out my thoughts. The cool but soft hand reassuringly held mine, making me spill my thoughts.

Though I hadn't laid bare my innermost secrets, I had conveyed the feeling of burden and difficulty.

Baek Ahrin, who had listened to my explanation, nodded understandingly.

She then tugged my hand and resumed walking.

The conversation ended. Baek Ahrin seemed to have something on her mind.

Meanwhile, I checked if the necklace had said anything strange.

Fortunately, it hadn't. It was just an emotional confession about feeling burdened and inadequate.

Though I regretted it, I hadn't spilled unnecessary past secrets.

My efforts to control the Necklace of Confession had paid off.

"Here we are!"

Finally, we arrived at the dormitory.

[Thank you for walking me back]

[I had a great time yesterday too]

Standing at the entrance of my dormitory building, I bowed my head in gratitude.

The enjoyment was genuine. At least, it wasn't a bad memory.

"I feel relieved hearing it from you again!"

Baek Ahrin responded with a bright smile.

She didn't seem upset about my earlier confession. I sighed in relief as I prepared to let go of her hand.

"Hayul."

Baek Ahrin lifted our clasped hands to my face.

"If you feel burdened or troubled about the engagement matter, I can help you."

[Help?]

"Yes, help."

Tilting my head at her enigmatic words, Baek Ahrin smiled and let go of my hand.

“Just keep that in mind. If it gets too overwhelming, I’ll help you out.”

Basically, she was offering her assistance if I needed it.

[Thank you]

[I’ll ask for your help if necessary]

It was a sincere offer of kindness.

I bowed my head, and Baek Ahrin smiled and waved her hand.

.

.

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Returning to the dormitory after a long time. Only a week had passed, but it felt like much longer.

Feeling a peculiar emotion, I walked down the corridor.

After getting off the elevator and walking for a while, my dorm room came into the observation range.

It wasn’t someone else’s house but mine. There was no need to refrain from observing.

With that thought, I didn’t withhold my observation.

– Crack… crack…

I noticed the Wish Egg in real-time, its shell cracking.

‘…Oh, my!’

I froze momentarily before rushing to open the door.

In the corner of the living room sofa.

The Wish Egg was rocking side to side, shedding fragments.

The barrier obstructing my observation trembled. It was a definite sign of hatching.

‘Oh, my…!’

Though my eyes were closed, I was certain my inner eyes were sparkling with excitement.

‘It’s opening, it’s opening…!’

The Wish Egg.

One of the few hidden pieces I managed to secure.

An item I suspected might never hatch…!

It was opening. It was hatching in real-time. It would open soon…!

My heart pounded. Calming my excited heart, I squatted in front of the sofa.

‘What will come out?’

My expectations soared. My body couldn’t help but fidget.

‘The Elixir of Extremes?’

The elixir that significantly contributed to the bizarre stat formation of the 11th round’s ‘Diamond Warrior’?

‘Or the Double-sided Mirror?’

The one-time artifact that allowed the 3rd round’s ‘Tri-Sword’ to copy a unique ability?

‘The Order of Reversal is good too.’

The one-time artifact that created the 5th round’s ‘Reverse Mage.’

Though it would be challenging to use, even that would be something. Even if I didn’t use it, it could fetch an enormous amount of money at auction.

Considering I once thought it might never hatch, I would even welcome a simple potion set.

I could use it myself or get it appraised and then either use or sell it.

Anything would be good.

Though, if I had a wish, I’d want something I could use during the break.

Of course, I planned to have insurance, but since I intended to do something risky, I hoped for something that could quickly enhance my power.

– Crack, crack, crack—!

As if responding to my expectations, the hatching speed of the Wish Egg increased.

Finally, a large crack formed, splitting the shell in two.

The barrier remained. But upon closer inspection, the shell had already split vertically.

‘Did it open?’

My heart pounded violently. Taking several deep breaths, I cautiously extended my hand.

– !

The Wish Egg rocked vigorously. The top of the shell tilted askew. The unprecedented intense reaction made me stop.

The egg continued to rock. It seemed something was inside.

‘?’

My hand trembled. I felt a slight, instinctive uneasiness.

And then.

– Crack!

A hand suddenly emerged from the crack in the shell.

A small arm with fair skin.

It felt around for a moment before another arm emerged from the other side with a crack.

The two wobbly arms suddenly retracted. Shortly after, a small hand slipped out and lifted the shell covering the egg.

The small hand raised the shell, revealing the being inside.

“Pyaa!”

A carefree laugh echoed, devoid of any worries.

Eyes as pure and white as the hair that had no other color.

It was an exotic-looking baby…

No, not just any baby.

The truly exotic part was elsewhere.

A pair of wings flapped behind the giggling baby.

Unlike the previous white color, the wings were semi-transparent and colorful, exuding a splendid beauty…

‘……’

My mind went blank. My thoughts were cut off, and a headache as if my skull was splitting hit me hard.

My ears rang. The sound seemed to stretch endlessly.

Ah, pa…

Daddy…

Daddy…

Daddy…?

Who are you calling?

Me?

– Bang!

At that moment.

A fierce headache and pressure I had never felt before overwhelmed me.

The already darkened vision turned even blacker…

* * *

[The Wish Egg accepts the origin of the Manifestor]

[Searching for conditions suitable to the Manifestor…]

[The Wish Egg hatches]

…

[Fairy Knight… Fairyknight hatch complete]

CHAPTER 124
SINGLE FATHER? (1)

For me, my biological parents were the epitome of a cautionary tale.

Humans, adults, couples, parents.

Not a single redeeming quality among them. They were filled with all kinds of faults. They perfectly embodied the worst of humanity.

Because of them, they served as warning signs for me.

A kind that I must never resemble.

A boundary that I mustn't fall to no matter what.

A line that tells me it's better to hang myself and die than to become like them…

So, no matter how badly I turned out, I tried my best not to resemble them.

I want to be a good person.

I want to grow into a good adult.

Though I lack confidence now… if I ever get married and build a family, I want to be a good spouse.

And though I can hardly imagine it… if I ever have children, I must make them happy.

I made that vow a long time ago. That thought remains unchanged.

Getting married. Having children. These are things to be considered very

carefully.

I must cautiously and thoroughly examine whether I can truly meet someone, build a family, and take responsibility for children—

“Ahppa!”

“……”

“Daddy?”

The resolve I struggled to recall was interrupted.

The cold reality I wanted to ignore was thrust upon me.

My eyelids twitched. My mind was such a mess that it felt like it might burst.

With trembling arms, I wiped my face and activated my observation again.

A mysterious baby sat on the sofa right in front of me.

The baby giggled brightly, seemingly delighted. It was a lively laugh that brightened up the surroundings.

Every time it chuckled, its snow-white eyes blinked, and its silk-like hair glimmered down its back.

Then it stretched out its hands to squish my cheeks. The softness and warmth of its petite palms were palpable.

If that was all, it would just be an incredibly adorable baby…

– Flap, flap

The wings sprouting from its back strongly emphasized that this was no ordinary human baby.

If you attached butterfly wings scaled down to baby size, it would look

something like that.

The vivid and colorful hues evoked a dreamy impression.

‘That’s… ’

I had seen wings like that in the original story.

Calming my dizzy head, I racked my brain.

A monster… a species I had rarely encountered while exploring uncharted territories and frequently faced when raiding the main house of the Taesan clan…

‘A fairy?’

A type of creature that should be classified as a higher species of spirit. A fantastic species living in nature untouched by human influence.

The Wish Egg has hatched.

It’s a significant event.

From it, a living being emerged instead of an item, elixir, artifact, or magic tool.

That’s extremely significant.

And it seems that living being is a fairy.

A fairy, which is hard to witness unless you raid the main house of the Taesan clan, is giggling in front of me.

That’s incredibly significant.

But…

“Da… ddy!”

It wasn't as significant as the word it kept repeating. Compared to this situation, it wasn't important at all.

'I don't want to hear this.'

I wasn't ready to hear such words. No, is it even my child in the first place?

I haven't had any relationships with anyone. Given that, it's impossible for me to have a child.

Thinking that far, I gritted my teeth. The baby might not understand, but I had to convey it to convince myself.

[I… I am…]

– Creak, creak…

The necklace rattled. The usually emotionless voice stuttered.

The unpleasant noise made the baby frown, which was still extremely cute.

[Your pa… parents…]

But that's that, and this is this.

No matter how cute it looks, what's wrong is wrong.

We're not even the same species.

Every time the word "parents" was directed at me, it felt like my mind was being crushed. My chest felt heavy, as if it might collapse.

My breathing became rough. A groan escaped my lips.

[No… it's not…]

The stuttering voice replayed. The constant creaking made the baby grimace and cover its ears with its hands.

“Waa…”

Its eyes suddenly welled up, and tears glistened as if it understood my words.

“Daddy…”

– Zzzt…

My mind went blank.

My consciousness, which hadn’t been cut off even when struck directly by Aerulus, was severed in an instant.

.

.

.

[No, no!]

[I’m sorry…!]

[I won’t say that…]

When I came to, I was holding the baby and hurriedly comforting it.

I wasn’t acknowledging myself as the father.

But I couldn’t just leave the baby, who thought of me as its father, crying… leaving it alone would be the worst thing to do, so I was comforting it for now.

I supported the baby with one hand, and to prevent it from falling backward, I used the Wings of the Sky to support its back.

“Hehe…”

The baby, who had been crying, was now smiling brightly and snuggling into my arms. The baby was so small that it fit perfectly in my embrace.

It was cute, but I had mixed feelings. A sigh almost escaped me…

– Hup…!

…But I covered my mouth.

I cautiously observed the baby. Worried it might cry again, I swallowed my breath in surprise. Fortunately, it didn't seem to hear.

Then, it occurred to me that the baby was naked, probably because it had just hatched.

'…Is this okay?'

The living room had an appropriate temperature. The baby didn't seem to be cold, but I worried it might catch a cold.

Babies generally have low immunity. Hence, they should always be kept in a clean and cared-for environment.

Moreover, this isn't just any newborn, but a human… fairy? baby? It seemed extremely dangerous to leave it like this.

I wasn't acknowledging myself as the father, but I couldn't just leave it alone.

– Woong!

First, I cast a widespread purification spell on myself and the surroundings. Even though I couldn't sense any dust or foreign substances through observation, just to be sure.

Then, I temporarily wrapped the baby in the Wings of the Sky. It's an artifact, so it should provide some warmth.

The baby looked like it was swaddled in a blanket.

“Uwu?”

The baby blinked up at me. Fortunately, it seemed to like the feel of the Wings of the Sky, as it touched it without resistance.

Relieved for a moment, the realization that nothing was resolved yet made my body slump again.

‘…What should I feed the baby?’

I carefully observed the baby.

It could sit on the sofa… Oh, it could also babble simple words like “daddy.” Its hair was long enough to reach its back…

[Aga? Just a moment…]

“Uwu? Beeh…?”

Supporting the baby’s buttocks with the Wings of the Sky, I carefully opened its mouth with my hand.

‘It has some teeth?’

If it has teeth, it should be fed baby food instead of formula…

‘At this stage, how many months old is it? If it has teeth, is it over 12 months? Then is it too late for vaccinations?’

No.

I’m still lacking in knowledge about this world.

This is a world where magic and unique abilities exist, so there could be differences from what I know.

Moreover, isn't this baby a fairy, not a human? Applying human standards to a fairy baby? is questionable.

I'm confused.

My knowledge is shallow and inadequate, making it hard to make decisions.

I definitely wasn't prepared. Acting recklessly with this limited knowledge could harm the baby…

My head throbbed. It wasn't the side effect of my ability, but a headache from mental stress.

– Kyaa!

But I couldn't make a distressed face in front of the happy baby.

It was truly a dire situation.

'…Alright.'

Patting the baby's back, I made a firm resolution and stood up.

One must acknowledge their shortcomings. Only by recognizing and feeling the gaps can they fill them.

Moreover, if there are parts you absolutely cannot fill, you must ask for help.

It's not just me at risk, but the baby could be in danger too.

I can't just make excuses about being sudden and the situation as it is… making excuses could lead to a disaster for the baby.

With trembling fingers, I tapped on my smartwatch.

.

.

.

Because of the midterms, Liana had been extremely busy lately.

Superhumans with elemental affinity are rare.

Those with a certain level of this quality are even rarer, and among them, those who excel and become great elementalists are extremely rare.

Liana, a top-tier elementalist, was a highly valued talent at Shio-ram, and thus heavily involved in creating and grading the midterms.

It was exhausting.

Of course, it wasn't as grueling as being on the front lines.

Maintaining a 24-hour state of alert, always on edge for monsters that could appear and threaten her life, was much more physically and mentally taxing.

But…

Liana, who had trained rigorously from a young age under countless expectant gazes and entered the front lines before reaching adulthood, had rolled and rolled until last year.

Now with the hero retired, she hoped for a relatively comfortable life! But even this schedule felt exhausting to Liana.

She wanted to throw everything away and escape or just lock herself in the lab… but she couldn't do that.

Hence, Liana trudged to the lab on a Sunday afternoon, which should have been a day off.

She planned to handle basic tasks and continue grading the still-pending midterms.

– Ding! Ding! Ding!

“Huh?”

[Contact: Cadet Lee Hayul]

▸Cadet Lee Hayul: I apologize for contacting you on a Sunday morning. I have an urgent matter to discuss.

▸Cadet Lee Hayul: I need your help.

▸Cadet Lee Hayul: Could we meet in your lab? I’d like to meet as soon as possible.

“Hmm?”

As she sipped her morning coffee and checked her emails, Liana’s eyes widened at the name Lee Hayul.

It was rare for him to initiate contact.

The content was also unusual. Apologizing for contacting her on a Sunday, needing help, wanting to meet as soon as possible…

‘We’re scheduled to meet for training tomorrow… Is it really that urgent?’

Tilting her head, Liana replied that he could come now. Lee Hayul quickly responded that he was on his way.

Clearly, something must have happened. Did something happen to him again?

‘How long has it been since the incident in Shipnaha? If it were something like that, wouldn’t he have gone to Atra?’

Though a bit disappointed, if Lee Hayul were in danger, he would have run to Atra rather than Liana.

So why was he coming to her?

– Knock, knock

[Professor]

[It’s Lee Hayul]

“Yes, come in.”

Lee Hayul arrived very quickly.

It must indeed be urgent.

After granting him entry, the door opened, and Lee Hayul, looking like a wet puppy, cautiously stepped in.

[I’m sorry for disturbing you on a day like this]

Setting aside the title of Ipchun class professor, she had been asked by the Principal to take good care of Lee Hayul. This wasn’t something to be sorry for.

Liana shrugged and took a sip of her coffee.

“No, I had already come in. So, what’s the—”

“Daddy?”

“—mat… ter…?”

A distinctive sound pierced her ears, freezing her hand mid-sip.

Her mouth, which had been sipping coffee, also froze, and her other hand stopped typing on the hologram keyboard.

“Huh?”

Blinking blankly, Liana turned to look.

Behind the awkwardly standing Lee Hayul, the usual wingsuit was missing.

Wrong. The wingsuit was not on his back but in front.

Precisely speaking, it was wrapped around a white baby…? A baby with wings… No, a fairy?

The fairy was wrapped like a precious bundle in the wingsuit, held tenderly as if it were his own child.

"…?"

Liana's mouth hung open.

There was no disaster of spilling coffee.

Fortunately, she had already swallowed it.

* * *

[The Fairy Knight is attuned to the player]

[A mental state [Affection] has responded]

…

[Player Adjustment System: Emotional Gauge]

…

▸Mental State

…

[Affection]: ?

…

[Player Adjustment System: Affinity]

Lee Hayul → Liana Velus

●●●●●●○○○○(65▸66/100)

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Kind Adult]

…

[You did not meet the condition to dispel the “Curse of Silence”]

[You did not meet the condition to dispel the “Curse of Loneliness”]

CHAPTER 125
SINGLE FATHER? (2)

I had somewhat anticipated Professor Liana's shocked reaction.

Wasn't I similar? Not just gaping, but my consciousness nearly flew away…

"So, from the Wish Egg artifact you obtained in The Tower of Growth, this baby emerged."

[Um…]

[Yes.]

"Oh my…"

Some time passed.

I finished explaining roughly. Professor Liana, who had listened calmly sitting on the opposite sofa, let out a sigh full of various emotions.

"When I heard Cadet Lee Hayul urgently needed help, I sensed something was off, but I never imagined you'd come with a baby…"

I never imagined this either, not even in my wildest dreams.

Professor Liana, who had been holding her forehead as if dizzy, looked up.

Her blinking green eyes examined the baby in my arms.

More precisely, the colorful wings spread behind the baby's back.

"And not just a human baby, but a newly hatched fairy… I'm amazed."

[I remembered what you explained about fairies, Professor.]

[I thought you'd know a lot about fairies since you deeply study elemental magic.]

The egg suddenly cracking and a baby popping out is maddening enough, but that baby calling me daddy makes me feel like the world is crumbling.

However, the fact that the baby's species is presumed to be a fairy is also a very important matter.

Unable to hide my complex feelings, I lightly touched the tip of its wing.

The colorful wing twitched. Fortunately, it didn't avoid or show any signs of discomfort. Rather, it seemed to flutter as if asking for more touch.

A purring sound resonated from around its chest.

One thing I discovered from constantly observing the baby was that it seemed to quite enjoy having the tips of its wings gently stroked occasionally.

"Since spirits and fairies have various relationships, I do know a bit about fairies."

Professor Liana, who had been watching the baby's behavior with a peculiar gaze, nodded and said.

'That's somewhat fortunate… '

I inwardly sighed in relief.

A baby emerged from the Wish Egg, which I thought would end up as a dud at best.

Wings presumed to be those of a fairy are attached to the baby's back.

And that baby is calling me daddy with a bright face…

Amidst all this, very fortunately, Professor Liana knows about fairies.

‘What should I ask first?’

Although I had organized my thoughts a bit, there was still so much I wanted to ask.

I hadn’t encountered the fairy species much even in the original story.

In the 3rd cycle ‘Three Swords’, I saw them during an official visit to the Taesan clan.

In the 11th cycle ‘Diamond Warrior’, I glimpsed them while ransacking the Taesan clan…

Other than that, I might have occasionally spotted them inside magical realms or in untouched nature in other cycles.

Even in the original story, encounters with fairies were rare.

As a result, my knowledge and information about them are limited.

[I have many questions.]

[May I ask them?]

“Yes, of course I’ll help.”

A readily given answer.

“Before that.”

Just as I was about to continue with my questions.

Professor Liana raised one hand to stop my inquiry.

Wondering what it was about, I straightened my posture as Professor Liana closed her eyes tightly.

Her slender fingers tapped the table, and her closed eyelids twitched.

She seemed to be in deep contemplation.

“Before that… may I ask a few things first?”

After waiting patiently, Professor Liana opened one eye and asked.

It’s a very simple request. Seeing her ask like this, I wonder if the explanation I just gave was insufficient.

I thought I had summarized properly and pointed out only the key points… Was it lacking?

[Yes.]

[I’ll answer sincerely to the best of my knowledge.]

“Thank you. It’s something I’ve been curious about for a while, so I feel we should address this first.”

Professor Liana smiled gently and rested her chin on her interlocked hands.

I nodded at the atmosphere that seemed to be getting to the main point.

To be honest, I wasn’t very nervous. I already knew that Professor Liana wasn’t a strange or malicious person.

I believe that whatever she wants to ask me, there’s no reason to harm me.

And.

“Is Cadet Lee Hayul really human?”

[Pardon?]

I heard a personal insult asking if I was human right to my face.

From the mouth of Professor Liana, who was always so kind and benevolent… an insult I never imagined would be directed at me.

My thoughts momentarily stopped at this absurd statement denying my species.

"…Why would you… Ah… Ah? Ah, ahhh!? No, no, wait! That's not what I meant!"

Professor Liana, who had been looking serious, blinked in embarrassment upon seeing my bewildered expression.

As if recalling her own words, she seemed to realize something and exclaimed with her eyes wide open.

Then she frantically waved her hands, denying her statement and saying it was a misunderstanding.

"That's not what I meant! I'm not insulting you! Really! I meant it literally, asking about your species!"

[I'm sorry…]

[If you point out what's wrong, I'll try to correct it.]

"No…! I really didn't mean it like that…"

Professor Liana's eyes spun around.

.

.

.

"I'm sorry. I should have added an explanation right away…"

It didn’t take long for the misunderstanding to be cleared up.

After Professor Liana’s active explanation, it seems there was no intention of insult or cursing, and she was genuinely asking about my species.

[I still don’t understand well.]

[Could you explain more, please?]

“Ahem… Of course.”

…That made me even more puzzled.

She asked if I was really human. It’s as if she thinks I might be a different species.

I couldn’t understand it at all.

What reason could there be to claim that I’m not human?

“There were several things I told Cadet Lee Hayul while guiding you a bit since the beginning of the semester.”

Professor Liana, blaming herself for the recent mistake, ruffled her hair and took a sip of coffee as if her throat was dry.

Then, as if determined not to repeat the same mistake, she explained while unfolding her fingers one by one from her clenched fist.

“First, the purity of your mana is absurdly high.”

[I remember.]

“It’s not just high, it’s too pure.”

Pure mana. High purity and virtually no impurities.

I didn’t know it at the time, but thinking about it now, that’s one of the

reasons why the Expansion Ability ‘Homogenization’ is possible.

It’s pure. Untainted and unmixed with miscellaneous things. Therefore, it can easily be dyed and polluted by anything.

Hence, it can be dyed and changed into anything.

Due to this characteristic, I was able to use Homogenization to mimic attribute and special category unique abilities.

“Second, the ability to control spirits without prior contracts, indicating a high level of spirit affinity.”

Professor Liana continued her explanation.

“Do you remember when I taught you that fairy mana is close to pure natural elemental power? It was during the spirit magic class.”

[I remember.]

“I also mentioned that spirits are beings composed of elemental power, and fairies as a species are specialized in handling spirits in various aspects, including the nature of their mana and affinity.”

[…I remember.]

Professor Liana wiggled her two outstretched fingers.

“Cadet Lee Hayul’s mana is so pure that it can be converted into ‘elemental power close to nature’.”

[For now… that’s correct.]

“Also, your affinity for spirits is abnormally high, allowing you to exert control over spirits without the need for contracts.”

‘……’

I had a hunch from the middle, but hearing this far, I roughly understood what Professor Liana was trying to say.

Mana purity. Elemental power. Affinity for spirits.

Thanks to her emphasizing and comparing while unfolding her fingers one by one, it was even easier to grasp.

Seeing that my thoughts were reflected in my expression, Professor Liana nodded.

“I thought Cadet Lee Hayul might not be human, but a fairy.”

[Does that make sense?]

The necklace immediately gave an incredulous response.

I understood why Professor Liana might think of me as… um… something like a fairy.

But I still couldn’t accept it myself.

I kept tilting my head and voicing my doubts.

[I know most fairies have very small bodies.]

That’s why I wasn’t sure if the baby in my arms was really a fairy.

All the fairies I know of are at most palm-sized.

Even then, their forms are barely visible due to the light emitted from their wings and entire body.

The baby’s wings certainly look fairy-like, but since its body size is that of a normal? baby, I couldn’t be sure.

“Fairies can be divided into several subspecies when examined in detail. Their sizes differ accordingly. Although most have hidden their appearances

now…”

Professor Liana pointed at the baby in my arms with her finger.

“If the information in ancient books is correct, that child is presumed to be a Fairy Knight… a Fairy Knight tasked with protecting the ruling individuals of the fairy species.”

[Fairy Knight? Fairy Knight?]

“Yes. If we compare it to ants, would it be similar to a soldier ant? Of course, Fairy Knights are more like an elite guard with adult strength equivalent to 4th tier…”

‘4, 4th tier?’

I observed the baby nestled quietly in my arms, fiddling with my hair.

Although it might seem weak compared to the many monsters that appear later on, even a 4th tier is a monster capable of fighting on par with top-tier heroes and wiping out parties composed of high-tier heroes.

Fairy Knight… It’s an entity I never heard of in the original story. Was the original wrong? Or did it exist but I failed to discover it?

“At first, I didn’t think Cadet Lee Hayul was a fairy either. I just thought you were a superhuman with an unusually high mana purity… just with a peculiar uniqueness.”

Professor Liana shrugged.

“I started to have doubts from the spirit-related aspects. Handling spirits without contracts is, to my knowledge, only possible for fairies. Of course, even this was just a possibility at that point.”

Professor Liana’s gaze alternated between me and the baby… the Fairy Knight quietly nestled in my arms.

"…But seeing this scene, the possibility seems more plausible again."

Pure mana.

Able to handle spirits without contracts like fairies.

A fairy emerged from the Wish Egg, which drops items suitable for the user…

[I understand there are many similarities, but…]

After organizing my thoughts for a moment, I tapped the necklace.

[Isn't that insufficient evidence to doubt my species?]

"Of course, I'm not certain either. While I know about fairies, I'm not an absolute expert on them."

However.

Professor Liana wiggled her finger, leaving room for possibility.

"The fact that a fairy was born from the Wish Egg artifact, that this fairy is a Fairy Knight individual, and that this Fairy Knight immediately calls Cadet Lee Hayul a parent and follows you… it greatly increases the possibility."

As the long explanation ended, an awkward silence fell over the lab.

'…What is this.'

I couldn't help but make a complex and subtle expression.

My body went limp, and I slumped back on the sofa.

My body slackened, and my mind stretched.

From earlier, shocking events had been occurring one after another, bombarding me indiscriminately.

Suddenly, a baby fairy hatches from an egg and calls me daddy.

And when I came for advice about that, now I'm hearing doubts about my very species, suggesting I might not be human…

'Then what about my parents?'

What about those who raised me? It's strange. Can fairies be born among humans? I'm originally from a previous world where the concept of different species didn't exist.

"Now, ask whatever you're curious about, Cadet Lee Hayul. I'll answer sincerely with everything I know!"

As if understanding my confused state of mind, Professor Liana smiled benevolently and allowed questions.

"Yaaawn…"

As I was absentmindedly mumbling, the baby opened its mouth and swallowed a languid yawn.

It seems sleepiness is creeping in. Babies do sleep a lot, after all.

Stroking the baby's head as its eyelids were about to crumble from drowsiness, I asked the first thing I needed to know.

[So, should the baby get vaccinated?]

"Pardon?"

[Even if it's a fairy, it's still a baby, right?]

[I was wondering if it should get vaccinated…]

Professor Liana blinked. She clearly didn't expect this question to come first.

CHAPTER 126
SINGLE FATHER? (3)

–… Vaccinations probably won't be necessary. Although it looks just like a baby except for the wings, it's still a fairy after all.

Even in this world where superhumans exist, vaccinations are of course present.

No matter how early one awakens, they are still vulnerable to minor illnesses before awakening since they're just normal babies.

And even after awakening, while minor ailments can be ignored, major illnesses are still threatening.

But apparently, it's an unnecessary measure for fairy babies.

Not only are their basic abilities racially superior to humans, but this one is a "Fairy Knight" individual specialized in combat, so it's even less necessary.

In other words, I felt relieved at the implication that it wouldn't experience minor illnesses very often.

– Trudge trudge

On the way back to the dormitory. The tiles of the managed road were gradually being dyed by the orange light creeping in.

It was already evening. The conversation with Professor Liana had gone on for quite a while.

"Snooore…"

Thanks to that, the baby had long since fallen asleep in my arms, unable to

overcome boredom and sleepiness, letting out steady breathing sounds.

'…Sleep well.'

The baby looked quite comfortable.

Using one strand of the Wings of the Sky as a pillow for its head, holding another strand in its arms, and wrapping a wide strand around itself, the baby slept in my arms.

Fortunately, it liked the texture, so I could hold it.

Thanks to being wrapped entirely in the Wings of the Sky, basic protection and temperature maintenance were possible at all times, and when its posture became uncomfortable, I could adjust it comfortably and correctly without using my hands.

'I really chose well.'

Choosing the Wings of the Sky was indeed the best decision. It's a winning streak. I've never regretted it.

While manipulating the Wings of the Sky to make the baby comfortable, I felt sorry for making it so late.

Professor Liana is a spirit mage. Spirits and fairies have a deep relationship, and in the process of learning about spirits, she also studied a lot about fairies.

She said she once went looking for fairies herself, and eventually made connections with the Taesan clan and visited fairies within their territory.

However, that doesn't mean she knows everything about fairies.

More precisely… she couldn't provide expert-level answers on how to raise a fairy.

It’s an obvious statement. After all, she’s a spirit mage, not a fairy mage.

What Professor Liana could answer was limited to her brief knowledge about fairies and information based on cases of spirits and other species.

To know more accurately, I need to find someone or a group who knows more about fairies than Professor Liana.

Both Professor Liana and I know of such a group.

‘Taesan… ’

Taesan (泰山).

One of the three major clans along with Gop-hwa and Changhae.

As you can tell from its status as one of the three major clans, Taesan is treated very importantly even in the original story.

Their power was tremendous as well.

Even the head of Taesan is a current top-tier hero, a powerful figure who has nearly reached the realm of pioneering.

Under the clan, they possess multiple units capable of long-term subjugation operations by entering magical realms.

But Taesan’s strengths don’t come from military power.

Taesan is a force that has settled in the southeastern part of the Korean Peninsula since its founding, with a territory mostly consisting of mountainous areas.

Just considering this, it might seem like not very good land, but the various natural herbs and materials that grow and originate there bring profits that even large-scale gold mines can’t ignore.

Add to that the continuous management using Taesan's unique ability to handle earth and life force… and you get land that truly laughs at the value of gold.

In some areas of Taesan's territory, there are zones where fairies have settled and live.

Members of the Taesan clan… or more precisely, those in charge of managing the fairies would know quite a lot about them.

'…I don't have much connection with Taesan.'

The problem is that I don't have any particular friendship with the Taesan clan.

I built relationships with Gop-hwa through Hong Yeon-hwa, and with Changhae through Baek Ahrin.

Since both of them are heirs to their clans, those friendships were quite substantial.

However, I haven't had any contact with members of the Taesan clan yet.

A member of the Taesan clan… I only briefly observed their heir at the tournament arena.

'Choi Jiyeon.'

The heir of the Taesan clan and currently a second-year student of the 120th generation at Shio-ram.

Choi Jiyeon is also a character who was quite frequently involved in the original story.

In the 1st cycle, we met in the early stages, built up affection, and she was a party member who stayed until the end, resisting the invasion of the towers.

She was involved in subsequent cycles as well.

In the 3rd cycle, things got complicated when Taesan's unique ability was discovered, and in the 4th cycle, we had a trading relationship for monster byproducts and various natural resources to replace the player's body.

In the 9th cycle… I killed and ate her to absorb her power…

9th cycle

A cycle where I completely abandoned play centered on good deeds and entered a genuine evil route.

It was a cycle where I ate members of Taesan, including Choi Jiyeon, to steal their powers with the unique ability 'Gluttony'.

In the 9th cycle, after committing a series of relentless evil acts, I was designated as the 'Top Priority Elimination Target' by the association and was soon subjugated by the allied forces that rushed in.

Anyway.

To build a relationship with the Taesan clan, it would be best to go through Choi Jiyeon, the heir of the clan.

I'm thinking of applying to her during the mentor classes in the second semester, so maybe I'll meet her officially then?

Of course, there's no guarantee that she'll accept me unconditionally, but… I think she'll probably accept me unless something unexpected happens. It's not like there are no other options.

[Cadet Lee Hayul, authenticated]

I arrived at the dormitory.

Thanks to concealing my appearance with magic and avoiding people's gazes

with the Power of Observation on the way, I didn't encounter anyone.

'It's not something that absolutely must be kept secret… but there's no need to announce it to everyone either.'

I was about to… swallow back a sigh as I tried to put the baby down on the bed.

– Grip…

As I was about to put the baby down along with the wing feathers, its tiny fingers grabbed onto my clothes.

It's a reaction of not wanting to be separated. It was the same at Professor Liana's lab.

I tried to lay it down on a makeshift bed with the Wings of the Sky to make it more comfortable, but it stubbornly refused to leave my arms.

With no choice, I set about my tasks while carrying the baby.

First, I tore open the box placed on the table and took out its contents.

It was a delivery I had ordered in advance during the morning, which I picked up from the parcel storage room installed in the lobby on the first floor of the dormitory.

The contents weren't very diverse.

Basically, clothes and diapers for the baby to wear.

I had hurriedly bought and put on some clothes and diapers on the way to the lab… but since I only bought one of each due to the rush, I've now ordered several sets.

And…

Several cylindrical containers piled up in one corner of the dining table.

On the surface was a light yellow background with scattered white clouds and a photo of a brightly smiling baby.

It's powdered formula I bought to feed the baby.

I thought about feeding it baby food since it has a few teeth, but… following Professor Liana's advice, I bought formula instead.

I picked it up with a strange expression.

It's something I thought I would have no connection with. I never imagined I would be buying and using this.

– Ding

[Starting to heat]

First, I boiled water to mix the formula. Surprisingly, there's a product called a formula kettle… a kettle specifically for mixing formula.

While the water was boiling, I manually washed and cast purification magic dozens of times on the baby bottle before scooping formula powder into it with a spoon.

Ding- When the water in the formula kettle reached the right temperature, it sounded an alarm. It was at a temperature that didn't require cooling.

I poured the boiled water from the formula kettle into the baby bottle. At first, I didn't pour all of it at once, but added just enough to dissolve the formula powder, then added the remaining water.

The process was quite convenient.

Maybe because it's a world with magic, some of the steps I knew were omitted.

“Eeng… paa.”

[Sorry for waking you up]

[Let’s eat and then sleep]

Since I couldn’t feed it while it was asleep, I had to wake the baby up again. When I gently rubbed its earlobe, the baby’s snow-white eyes opened drowsily.

I apologized and patted its back while holding it in my arms.

I supported the baby’s back with my arm, and using the wing feathers appropriately, I supported its neck, head, and overall body.

It’s quite a strange sight. If someone saw from the side, they might think I was some tentacle monster, but for me with only one arm, this is the best I can do.

I carried out all the previous steps by finely controlling the Power of Observation.

The temperature of the boiled water. The amount of formula put in the bottle and the process of dissolving it. Even the posture of holding the baby, everything was done accurately according to the instructions.

I wrapped the formula bottle with the wing feathers and brought it to the baby’s mouth.

– Sniff? Sniff sniff…

The baby’s nose twitched at the approach of this strange thing. The baby blinked its eyes and then opened its mouth wide to latch onto the bottle.

– Slurp… slurp?

The baby’s eyes widened as it instinctively sucked. Soon, the contents of the

bottle gradually decreased along with strangely quickened sucking.

"……"

The sight of the baby doing this is incredibly peculiar.

The formula was quickly emptied. I fed it at the lab too, but… babies do eat a lot, don't they.

I adjusted my hold on the baby. Perhaps because it was warm overall and its stomach was full, the face resting on my shoulder looked extremely drowsy.

"Hic."

At that moment.

The baby's body twitched slightly, and a small burp came out of its mouth. It's doing well on its own without me needing to rub and pat its back to induce it.

After some time passed and the baby let out a few burps, it fell asleep with steady breathing sounds.

The baby… the baby…

'I should… give it a name too.'

While observing the sleeping baby's appearance with a strange emotion, I fell into deep contemplation about a thought that had been nagging at me.

For humans, a name is a word that signifies oneself, distinguishing them from other humans.

Usually, names are given by parents.

Or grandparents or other relatives might give a name after much consideration, and sometimes people go to a naming agency to receive a

name with deep meaning.

I named myself.

My parents didn't give me a name, and it was only after my house burned down and I entered an orphanage that I realized the need for a name and named myself directly.

At the time, I didn't care what my name would be, but I felt some aversion to having someone I had no connection with just randomly name me, so I flipped through a dictionary and named myself.

'Lee Hayul.'

The 'Lee' (彝) meaning righteous, 'Ha' (何) meaning how, and 'yul' (律) meaning law or principle.

If I were to forcibly interpret it… it means to always follow the rules I've set for myself wherever and whenever to be righteous.

I'm satisfied with my name.

To be honest, I just scribbled it down at the time, but I've never been made fun of for having a strange name, nor have I ever been inconvenienced by it.

'……'

But if I were in a situation to give someone else a name, I would never do it carelessly.

I'm facing such a situation right now.

I can't keep calling it baby, child, infant, etc. indefinitely.

I have to… give it a name.

As soon as that thought occurred to me, my head started spinning.

That's usually something family… parents do.

I am not the baby's parent. I don't have the qualifications or ability to be a parent.

I don't intend to argue about other people's standards for being a parent, but I fall far short of even the minimum level I've set for myself to become a parent.

I don't have enough money, my knowledge about child-rearing is poor… I'm just lacking in everything.

But.

"……"

The baby follows me as its parent… and just thinking about leaving such a child at a facility like an orphanage makes my head feel like it's about to burst with pain.

That would be… acting like my 'parents'. It's something I absolutely must not resemble or imitate. It would be denying my fundamental self.

– Sigh…

Carefully exhaling, I organized my thoughts.

I summarized it simply instead of making it complicated.

Becoming a parent is a burdensome task.

The baby is following me as its parent.

I'm someone who doesn't qualify to be a parent.

But the idea of abandoning a baby that follows me as its parent is repulsive just to imagine. It's impossible.

Then… I have to raise it.

'…They said fairies grow up quickly.'

It doesn't take as long as humans for fairies to reach physical maturity.

According to Professor Liana… especially Fairy Knights, specialized in protecting rulers, grow at a faster rate even among fairies.

She said that period is only a few years. By then, they become adults by fairy standards.

In other words, they reach a level where they can think and judge normally.

'I just need to… raise it until then.'

I have absolutely no qualifications to be a parent, but if I had to pick the biggest flaw, it would be my uncertain lifespan.

If I suddenly die face-down on the street while raising the baby, it would be really, really difficult for the baby.

But if things go as expected, even if I can't break the curse, I should last a few years, and during that time, the baby will become an adult and be able to live on its own.

Also, I'll contact the Taesan clan before that, and if I suddenly die, I plan to ask them to send the baby to the fairies.

It's truly a complex feeling. Has there ever been a time when my heart felt more unsettled than this?

Swallowing back a sigh that was about to escape involuntarily, I patted the baby's back.

"Ehehe…"

Just from that simple action, the sleeping baby smiled broadly as if everything in the world was happy.

I felt even more complicated emotions.

.

.

.

The sun set and rose again. A day had passed.

Yellow eyes blinked repeatedly. The expression was very complex… and full of bewilderment.

Elia's gaze, which had been scanning my face, moved down to the baby nestled in my arms with an uncomprehending expression.

"You want us to take care of this baby at our house during the vacation?"

[Yes…]

A day after I made a commitment to somehow raise it until adulthood.

I uttered words that were worse than those of a bug-like incompetent guardian.

CHAPTER 127
NAME

The important schedules for the first semester, such as the Tower of Growth, midterm evaluations, and the tournament, have all concluded.

Additionally, since the progress for both general and major courses has reached the end of the first semester, there is some available free time.

Therefore, students tend to slack off during the short gap period before the vacation starts.

They meet friends they haven't had time to see, and they explore the commercial district they had to ignore due to their studies.

"Oh… this is way too sweet. The previous one was just right."

"The previous ones were sweet enough to spoil your taste. How do people even buy this series?"

Shin Seo-yul took a sip of her drink and furrowed her brows. The sweetness was so intense it made her head throb.

Yang Yoon-ha, sitting next to her, gave her a scolding look.

"Don't you know about respecting preferences? People are different, you see. Especially for superhumans, individuality is important… tsk tsk."

"What's with the exaggeration over a single comment?"

"Hmph! Someone with barely any Expansion Abilities dares to talk back!"

"And what about you, who got beaten by someone like me?"

“Ugh…”

Shin Seo-yul, unable to counter the objective truth, eventually put down her barely touched drink on the table.

The cool air touching her skin and the sweet taste inside her mouth felt refreshing… and the friends gathered around the table, including Yang Yoon-ha, who had just scolded her.

It was a long-awaited gathering of friends.

They had been too busy to meet since the dungeon practice at the beginning of the semester.

Moreover, with so many other things to do, it had been difficult to just relax and have fun.

Shio-ram has a four-year education system.

Cadets at Shio-ram receive the Blessing of Growth for four years. After that, even if they become faculty, they do not receive any additional blessings.

After graduation, they return to a normal growth rate.

Superhumans have long lifespans.

Spending even a short period of the unique blessing of growth, which only lasts four years, on leisure activities feels wasteful.

Utilizing those four years entirely for training to maximize efficiency is considered the right approach. Both outsiders and cadets themselves think this way.

Theoretically.

If you fill those four years entirely with training, you can achieve maximum efficiency.

Who doesn't know that? But theory and reality are different.

Humans are not machines.

You can't just wipe away the rusted parts. Oil alone won't make a creaky body work smoothly.

Even if you inject oil, it doesn't mean it will work just the right amount, and you can't always achieve the same performance.

You can't replace a part like you would in a machine.

Even superhumans, for all their superiority, share this trait.

Though sturdier than humans, their foundation is still human.

Therefore, humans must be cared for with more attention than machines.

The body requires periodic rest. The same goes for the mind that drives the body.

Especially for the mind, ample rest is even more crucial.

While the body can somewhat be repaired, the mind is a different story. Once it stretches and breaks, there's no fixing it.

For this reason, Shin Seo-yul and her friends gathered for a long-overdue meeting.

The gathering was simply about meeting at a cafe, chatting, and sharing updates and grievances.

It had been a long time since they last met. There were plenty of stories to share. Since they weren't strangers, there were many topics to bring up.

"……"

"……"

However, after the earlier conversation, there was silence. They were all pretending not to notice while actually gauging each other's reactions.

In fact, there hadn't been much conversation to begin with.

It was due to the atmosphere created by two people among the six present.

Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin.

Usually, these two would be bickering and making noise, but they were quiet.

Normally, Baek Ahrin would tease Hong Yeon-hwa and bring up all sorts of topics.

Hong Yeon-hwa, in turn, would react with exaggerated responses, providing laughter, and accepting Baek Ahrin's teasing despite grumbling.

But both were in a very static mood. Thanks to this, the friends who had gathered after a long time were rolling their eyes, trying to grasp the situation.

Shin Seo-yul was also rolling her eyes and tapping the hologram projected under the table.

[Group Chat: Room Without Hong-Baek (4)]

▸Shin Seo-yul: What's wrong with them?

▸Lee Si-eun: I don't know, they've been like this since we met.

▸Shin Seo-yul: Are they nuts?

▸Yang Yoon-ha: Ask why they're like that.

▸Shin Seo-yul: If I ask now, it'll feel like I'm walking into a minefield.

▸Yang Yoon-ha: That's exactly why you should ask.

▸Shin Seo-yul: ?

Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin often quarrel. This has led to a playful nickname among friends – ‘Hong-Baek Alliance War’ – which happens periodically.

Judging by the atmosphere, Shin Seo-yul thought it felt more like an all-out war than just a skirmish.

It wasn’t as if they were about to draw swords and attack each other, but there was a palpable tension beneath the surface.

‘What the hell is up with her?’

Indeed, Hong Yeon-hwa was not about to draw a sword and charge, but she was deeply engrossed in thought, filled with a sense of foreboding.

Hong Yeon-hwa stared at her iced coffee, lost in thought.

She knew well of Baek Ahrin’s ambition for talent.

Baek Ahrin, who had entered the social scene at a young age and expanded her network, was someone who understood the value of connections.

It wasn’t that Hong Yeon-hwa couldn’t understand Baek Ahrin’s interest in Lee Hayul.

Even without the rose-colored glasses, everyone acknowledged Lee Hayul’s potential.

Naturally, Baek Ahrin, with her keen eye for talent, wouldn’t overlook it either.

In fact, she had been quite friendly and tried to build rapport with him at the beginning of the semester.

She understood. Baek Ahrin was ambitious for talent and valued

connections. It made sense that she wanted to get close to Lee Hayul for future benefits.

'……'

However, recently Baek Ahrin's actions seemed excessive. It felt too intense to be explained by her ambition for talent.

What on earth was she scheming?

Hong Yeon-hwa looked up and stared at Baek Ahrin.

"What are you all planning to do during the vacation?"

Then, Baek Ahrin, who had been silently sipping her drink while staring at the hologram, finally spoke.

"I plan to spend time at the family's magical vein, training in magic."

"Oh… I'll go back home to rest for a bit and then probably hit the dungeons."

"I'm scheduled to tour the borders of the demon realm with the subjugation force…"

"Oh, that sounds tough. I'll wish you luck in advance."

"F*** you."

Shin Seo-yul, who had been glancing back and forth between the two, spoke hesitantly. The other friends also started to join the conversation.

"What about you, Yeon-hwa?"

Hong Yeon-hwa was the last one left. Feeling the eyes on her, she remained silent for a moment, then gulped down her coffee before speaking.

"I'll head straight to the main house."

“Right. There’s the regular family gathering. You have to attend that.”

“Yeah. As the heir, I can’t miss it.”

This regular gathering of the Gop-hwa clan was a significant event where not only the main family but also the branch families would attend. As the heir, Hong Yeon-hwa couldn’t miss it.

“……”

And.

Except for Baek Ahrin and Elia, who were present at the scene, it wasn’t widely known, but Lee Hayul would be brought to the main house during the vacation for an evaluation related to Gop-hwa.

As a result, Lee Hayul’s visit might overlap slightly with the regular family gathering.

It would be extremely rude to just send off a precious guest who visits during the family gathering.

So, Lee Hayul might end up attending the gathering as a guest. Purely as a guest…

It wasn’t intentional, but it could turn out that way.

Listening to the slowly opening conversation sparked by Baek Ahrin, Hong Yeon-hwa took another sip of her coffee.

She felt more at ease than before.

* * *

Despite the gap period, I had no intention of playing around.

I had already rested enough during the midterm evaluation period, and

having free time meant I could focus on other things.

Though the period was short, it was enough to consolidate what I had learned.

I planned to receive intensive training in spiritology from Professor Liana.

I also intended to hover around the production major area to stealthily pick up some production-related skills from that person.

“Puuwuu…”

However, the sudden arrival of a baby disrupted those plans.

After all, even though it was a fairy, it was still a newborn baby. I couldn’t just leave the baby alone and go out.

I skipped the common lecture on Monday morning.

Perhaps because it was the gap period, it was surprisingly easy to do.

I spent the morning focusing on taking care of the baby in the dormitory.

While doing so, I racked my brain.

‘…There’s no solution.’

I quickly reached a despairing conclusion.

In the end, I didn’t have enough time to take care of the baby.

After all, I was a cadet. Given my academic responsibilities, I couldn’t afford sufficient time for childcare.

While I might have more time once the second semester started…

I desperately brainstormed. And the answer I came up with… it was an answer that would likely get me stoned for being an unworthy guardian.

Monday afternoon.

Instead of attending my teacher's major lecture, I visited Professor Liana's lab for a spiritology lesson.

"The baby is really cute! Except for the wings, it looks like a human…"

"Puuwuuuu…!"

"Good, good… such a good baby."

Elia smiled widely, holding the baby in her arms. There was a maternal touch in the way she carefully supported the baby's head and patted it.

Her posture was natural. She had said she was used to caring for her younger siblings, and it seemed to be true.

However, the baby in her arms looked dissatisfied. It puffed up its cheeks and made whining sounds.

Anyone could see that it was expressing its displeasure. It had been like this from the start. When Elia reached out to hold it, it had puffed up like an angry pufferfish.

Then it turned its eyes toward me.

"……"

Its eyes, filled with desperation, made me feel crushed by guilt.

But there was no choice.

I could skip all the lectures during the gap period. It would be my responsibility to handle the consequences, but it was possible.

During the vacation… there were things I had to do.

I had to visit the Gop-hwa clan with Hong Yeon-hwa for the evaluation

related to Gop-hwa. This was fine. I could creatively bring the baby along.

'…But after that, it's impossible.'

The next schedule was impossible. The place I had to visit after the Gop-hwa clan was not suitable for bringing a baby.

It was dangerous. If I didn't have insurance to preserve my life, I wouldn't be heading there now.

Skipping the schedule was also not an option.

I had to become stronger. I had to break the curse and become strong enough to ensure the safety of those around me.

If I settled down for the baby's sake… I would soon die due to the curse, and the world would end.

…In short, I was making excuses.

Using those excuses, I asked Elia and her family if they could take care of the baby just for the vacation period.

There was a reason I specifically asked Elia's family.

Elia's family owed me and had asked me to reach out whenever I needed help…

And Elia's parents had considerable experience in childcare.

Even though it was a fairy baby, Professor Liana had assured me that the childcare methods were relatively similar.

"Since it's Hayul's request. There's no way we would refuse the request of a benefactor."

[Thank you so much]

[You saved me]

“I couldn’t just stand by and watch a baby taking care of a baby. If Hayul hadn’t asked, I would have offered help myself.”

[I’m not a child…]

Although there was an odd statement in the middle, fortunately, the response was positive.

Elia skillfully soothed the sulky baby, showing her adeptness in holding it.

“By the way, it’s really fascinating. A fairy hatched from that egg…”

Elia, who had been with me when I obtained the Wish Egg, found the fairy’s birth quite fascinating.

‘Come to think of it, didn’t Elia joke about frying the Wish Egg?’

It felt odd to think that the baby, born from that egg that Elia had joked about, was now in her arms.

For some reason, I felt like I understood why the baby was sulking…

“What’s the baby’s name? Have you already given it one?”

At that moment, Elia, while cradling the sulky baby, asked.

After a brief hesitation, I nodded.

I couldn’t keep calling it “baby,” so I had stayed up all night to decide on a name.

[Lee Seo-yul]

[It’s Lee Seo-yul]

Lee Seo-yul.

I had the honor of naming the baby.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul→Elia Slade

[●●●●●●●○○○(73▷75/100)]

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Chick] [Guilt]

…

Lee Hayul→Lee Seo-yul

[●●●●●●●●○○(89/100)]

[?] [Guilt] [Sense of Guilt] [Self-reproach] [Embarrassment] [Anxiety] [Worry] [Agony] [Bitterness]……

…

[You did not meet the condition to lift the “Curse of Silence”]

[You did not meet the condition to lift the “Curse of Loneliness”]

CHAPTER 128
CONVERSATION

I skipped all the common lectures for a while.

It was only possible because it was the gap period; otherwise, it wouldn't have been possible during the regular period.

Of course, even during the gap period, there would be various difficulties and a slight delay in growth… but that's a problem I have to deal with.

It's not like I just skipped without saying anything.

I submitted a reason form to each professor, stating it was for personal training, and when concerned people asked if something was wrong, I gave similar excuses.

Surprisingly, the permissions were granted easily.

The timing was right, and it also helped that I had established a diligent image beforehand.

Moreover, it's not unheard of for cadets to skip during the gap period for reasons like this.

Of course, the reason was merely personal training.

[Seo-yul? It's time to eat now.]

"Food? Food! Yay!"

[That's right.]

[Come here.]

In reality, I spent time in the dormitory with the baby… Lee Seo-yul.

I didn't want to be a lousy guardian running around during the vacation, and I didn't want to be a jerk running around during the gap period, leaving Seo-yul behind.

With movements I've become quite familiar with, I lifted Seo-yul into my arms.

"Nom… nom…"

[No need to rush.]

[No one's going to take your food, so take your time…]

I gently patted Seo-yul's head as it peacefully sucked on the bottle of formula while nestled in my arms.

The soft white hair slipped between my fingers, conveying a sensation otherworldly.

'……'

Once again, I realized that Seo-yul was like an angel.

Not in the sense of being an angelic race, but in character, there was no other angel.

I have no experience in childcare, but I have some knowledge and hear stories as I live.

Childcare is a nightmare.

Raising a baby is incredibly difficult. Even if you haven't experienced it firsthand, you hear about it from those around you.

Babies have weak immune systems, so you have to be careful about

cleanliness. You have to consider what to feed them, and if they have sensitive skin, you have to consider what clothes to dress them in.

Their skin is delicate, and their bones are soft. Since their bodies are fragile, you have to ensure everything around them is safe.

You have to constantly watch for any sudden behavior the baby might exhibit, and you have to soothe and care for a baby that cries at any time, day or night…

Even just thinking about it briefly brings up so many things.

Taking care of a baby is incredibly challenging. Knowing this, I prepared for the possibility of pulling all-nighters during the gap period.

“Hic… eh…”

[Are you sleepy? Do you want to take a nap?]

“Uh-huh…”

But Seo-yul was different.

Having emptied the bottle, Seo-yul snuggled up in my arms. When I patted its back and asked if it was trying to fall asleep, it shook its head.

Based on information gathered over the past few days, this was an expression of wanting to enjoy the current drowsiness without falling asleep.

The premise of enjoying drowsiness was that it would be enjoyed in my arms.

If I put it down, even Seo-yul, who rarely fusses, would throw a tantrum.

So, I held Seo-yul in my arms for a while.

When I sat on the sofa by the window, just the right amount of sunlight

poured in.

“Hehe…”

Seo-yul smiled at that.

With a bright smile, its wings fluttered gently.

Tiny sparkles appeared along the wing’s trajectory.

Not a human, but a fairy.

So, I expected that the method of childcare would be different.

Surprisingly, Seo-yul was much easier and quieter to handle than expected.

Seo-yul hardly ever cried.

Partly because I was awake 24 hours a day, and when it wanted to, it would call out to me with its still-murmuring voice or crawl over to me and pat me.

Besides that…

Seo-yul understood my words and acted accordingly, even though I hadn’t taught it any language.

It almost never needed to go to the bathroom. I had fitted it with diapers, but it had never had a bowel movement. It only urinated slightly.

When I checked its inner body out of concern… all I found was that it absorbed nutrients almost entirely, leaving no waste.

“……”

Recalling that, my expression naturally became peculiar.

It understood my words and acted accordingly, even without being taught a language.

I, too, understood my parents' words immediately, even without learning any language separately.

It hardly needed to go to the bathroom. Most nutrients were absorbed.

I was the same. The only reason I went to the bathroom was to solve minor urination and to clean my body.

– I thought Cadet Lee Hayul might not be human, but a fairy.

Not a human, but a fairy.

It was a strange statement. Being suddenly denied my species, it was only natural to be bewildered.

Back then, I was too dizzy to think deeply, but… with each similarity between Seo-yul and me appearing, my head became increasingly complicated.

'…I'll think about it later.'

Of course, my head was dizzy and busy even now.

It was a very important matter, but… it's premature to make a definite decision now.

I postponed the confirmation as usual.

-Ding-dong~

Just then, the doorbell rang.

"Eeek…"

I already knew from the observation before the doorbell rang, so I got up, and Seo-yul, who had been lying comfortably, unexpectedly scrunched up its face.

Even such a face was incredibly adorable, and I almost burst into laughter.

Of course, if I did, Seo-yul would surely pout, so I swallowed my laughter and tapped the hologram projected from the wall.

-Beep… click

The door, operated remotely, opened.

“Good morning again today!”

[Good morning.]

A lively morning greeting.

I responded to the consistent morning greeting I’ve been hearing for the past few days.

[Elia.]

The woman taking off her shoes at the entrance.

Elia smiled brightly and waved her hand.

She was holding a plastic bag as if she had been grocery shopping.

On the first day of the gap period, Elia, who had accepted my request, had been visiting my dormitory consistently since then.

[Was there anything left to buy besides what you got yesterday?]

“No. I just bought a few snacks and jelly in case you felt peckish.”

I took the plastic bag with a feather of Wings of the Sky as she approached.

“Oh, thank you.”

With her hands free, Elia quickly took off her shoes and came inside.

Then, she looked at the item placed in one corner of the living room and

made a peculiar expression.

"…Something new appeared overnight again."

As expected, she looked somewhat exasperated.

At that, I slightly observed the dormitory.

Originally, my dormitory was known for its starkness.

With a structure unchanged since admission, I hadn't brought in any additional furniture like other cadets did, nor did I add any decorative elements.

I hadn't used the dormitory much in the first place.

Now, it's quite bustling.

The smooth and hard floor tiles were mostly covered by a soft mat, hiding most of their appearance.

The living room, which only had a table and a sofa, was now filled with furniture equipped with corner guards.

The kitchen, where I had stashed away all the cooking tools in the cabinets, was now stocked with quite a few items.

I had also brought in several pieces of furniture to the empty room, giving the once stark dormitory a fairly lived-in feel.

"This is… a cradle, isn't it? Don't tell me you also…"

Elia looked at me with a hint of suspicion, stroking the newly acquired furniture from yesterday.

I nodded nonchalantly.

[Yes.]

[I made it.]

Several bookshelves in the previously empty room, a small dining table and furniture tailored to Seo-yul's size, various wooden toys…

The cradle Elia was touching, and even the clothes Seo-yul was wearing right now, were made by me.

I crafted the furniture in the room I used as a workshop, and I used the sewing skills I learned last time, along with additional skills I acquired, to make Seo-yul's clothes.

My proficiency in Jack of All Trades had increased significantly. I had practiced skills like dexterity, woodworking, and manufacturing a lot under it.

While it's not a superhuman weapon or a complex mechanical device, I could make furniture or toys myself.

I especially paid a lot of attention to the clothes. Since I had grown a lot since making Hong Yeon-hwa's scarf, I was able to engrave all sorts of convenience and protection magic into them.

Unlike before, having only one hand was a bit cumbersome, but the result turned out quite nicely.

"Honestly… I have nothing to say."

Hearing my explanation, Elia, shaking her head as if she was at a loss for words, extended her hands and slid them between Seo-yul's armpits to pick it up.

In response, Seo-yul shuddered and then burrowed deeper into my arms.

"Eeek…"

"Seo-yul~ Let's go to Sister, okay?"

The brief struggle for strength didn't last long.

Seo-yul, exhausted, was finally lifted and cradled by Elia.

"Eeek…!"

"Seo-yul, shall we let Dad rest for a bit?"

"Ugh…"

"Good. Our Seo-yul is so good~"

Even while buried in Elia's ample chest, Seo-yul's struggles gradually subsided at the mention of letting me rest.

Elia smiled brightly and patted Seo-yul's head.

Seo-yul puffed up its cheeks but didn't actively reject her touch.

It was a significant improvement.

On the first day, Seo-yul had completely rejected both Elia's and Professor Liana's touch.

That's why Elia kept visiting my dormitory.

By frequently visiting and getting familiar with Seo-yul, I could see that Seo-yul's resistance was waning.

Of course, I thought it might also be because Seo-yul sensed that Elia was genuinely caring for it.

"How's Seo-yul's status?"

A while later.

As Elia was having the simple breakfast I had prepared, she tilted her head and asked.

Currently, Seo-yul doesn't have a status.

Or more precisely, it hasn't been registered yet.

Stroking the satisfied Seo-yul, who had finally returned to my arms, I replied.

[I was planning to mention it today.]

[Please take care of Seo-yul for a bit in the afternoon.]

[I have someone to discuss the status issue with.]

There was a way regarding that.

.

.

.

A few hours later.

I opened the door of a café and entered.

It was one of the cafes located in a corner, not in the Shio-ram commercial district.

The bell attached to the glass door jingled.

A clear sound filled my ears.

The interior was spacious and well-equipped, but there were no customers.

"Cadet Lee Hayul, you're reserved on the second floor."

The only staff member waiting at the counter recognized me and spoke up.

I nodded and took the stairs installed on the side to the second floor.

I stepped onto the spacious second floor, which was as large as the first floor, as I ascended the creaking wooden stairs.

Sunlight poured down on me from the window beside me.

I sensed a presence.

Like the first floor, there was only one person on the second floor.

The hair was neatly combed back.

The person was dressed in a black and white suit with a luxurious design wristwatch on one wrist.

A man who looked like a typical office worker.

The man, who had his fingers interlaced on the table and his eyes closed, slowly lifted his eyelids.

Dark eyes.

He then stood up with a neat and professional office worker's smile.

He pushed the chair with care, but I could still faintly hear the sound of the chair scraping.

I moved closer until I was right in front of the man.

Maintaining his professional smile, the man cautiously extended one hand.

"It is an honor to meet you, hero. I'm Maxwell from the Disaster Management Department under the Association."

'Maxwell.'

I repeated that name internally, sharpening my senses.

My sense of touch and hearing became more acute in detecting presences.

The sensation of clothes brushing against my skin, the wind and vibrations tapping against my skin.

I could even distinguish the faint rustling of leaves in the distance and the cries of dozens of birds.

And the presence from the man became even more pronounced.

The sound of a beating heart and the sound of breathing in and out. The inevitable presence created by a person.

There was nothing particularly strange.

The roughly named echolocation technique found no incongruities between this man and the space.

That was what made it rather eerie.

I ignored the man's outstretched hand and moved.

I reached the space between the windows.

The presence felt there was equally unremarkable.

The sound of wind hitting the outer wall was realistic.

But the flow of magic was peculiarly odd.

I reached out and pulled the wall to the right.

– Thud!

The flow of magic rippled.

The information conveyed by my senses completely changed.

The presence of the man standing behind me disappeared.

The overall presence of the second floor changed.

The ‘door’ that was felt only through the Power of Observation opened.

The real second floor opened. In the center, the man from before was sipping coffee.

At the sound of the door opening, he turned his eyes to me, standing in front of the open door.

The man stood up with a professional smile.

Even though he carefully pushed the chair, I could still faintly hear the sound of the chair scraping.

I moved towards the man until I was right in front of him.

Maintaining his professional smile, the man cautiously extended one hand.

“It is an honor to meet you, hero. I’m Maxwell from the Executive Department directly under the Chairman of the Association.”

The meeting with the Association, which had been postponed due to the Shipnaha incident, was finally happening.

* * *

[Unique Ability [Mana Affinity] is growing]

[Unique Ability [Jack of All Trades] is growing]

…

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul→Elia Slade

[●●●●●●●○○○(75▷76/100)]

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Chick] [Guilt]

CHAPTER 129
POINTS

The Age of Peace.

Though it's called that, when you examine it closely, it's not entirely peaceful.

The sea has practically become a domain of monsters.

Crossing the vast ocean to travel between continents has become impractical, except perhaps in shallow waters.

The sky, while different in its challenges, faces a similar situation.

There are flying monsters, and above all, the chaotic magical fluctuations make it extremely difficult to launch aircraft high and often.

The influence of magical fluctuations didn't stop there. They even destroyed the communication networks that once unified the world.

Both physical movement and the sharing of information through networks have effectively ceased.

This was one of the reasons humanity was so helplessly driven into a corner during the period of chaos.

That was the case during the chaos.

But it's not the same now.

The Power of Space has interconnected the world more closely than ever before through gates.

You can travel to various parts of the world without crossing the sea and the

sky.

The Power of Harmony has broken down language barriers and restored a communication network far superior to the one that had disappeared in ancient times.

Information can be shared without having to lay complex cables on the seabed.

The World Superhuman Association, a force that is not an exaggeration to say sustains and maintains the current system of the world.

Thanks to the powers of the association's founders.

"It's an honor to meet you, hero. I'm Maxwell from the Executive Department under the Chairman of the Association."

[The pleasure is mine.]

[I'm Lee Hayul.]

"I'm at a loss for words that the hero of Shipnaha speaks of me so."

The man who introduced himself and his affiliation, Maxwell, extended his right hand to request a handshake.

His smile and posture were appropriate. An impeccable stance without any faults.

It was also the demeanor felt in the fake second floor.

'Maxwell.'

In the strange situation earlier, I guessed, but hearing that name still left me somewhat flustered.

Maxwell is a character frequently encountered in the original work.

“Ah, please have a seat. I’ve prepared everything in advance.”

With a response, I shook hands with him. Maxwell, smiling warmly, guided me to the table.

As he said, there were already drinks and simple snacks prepared on the table.

Since it’s within Shio-ram, there wouldn’t be any threats, but he is still a person I’m meeting for the first time.

Using the Power of Observation, I inspected the drinks and snacks, but detected no harmful properties.

As I took a sip of my drink, Maxwell began to speak.

“May I explain the situation earlier, if it is not too intrusive?”

[Yes.]

[Please go ahead.]

“Thank you for your large-heartedness.”

After moistening his throat with tea, Maxwell continued.

“The phenomenon earlier was due to my unique ability. It’s an illusion-based unique ability, manifested across the entire second floor.”

As he raised a finger, a butterfly landed on it.

A breeze blew. The result of the wind on my skin was the sound of the butterfly’s wings reaching my ears.

…Magic detected him as alien.

The Power of Observation provided the information that his fingertip was an empty space.

Illusion.

An ability that deceives senses and perception.

In the end, an illusion is disconnected from reality.

Thus, to ensnare someone in an illusion, it is necessary to deceive the senses that perceive reality, and the sharper the target's senses, the less effective it is.

My senses, particularly hearing and touch, are exceptionally sharp.

I don't know if it's because other senses are blocked and thus specifically heightened, but… even if it's not at the level of a unique ability, it's developed enough to be called a skill.

Despite that, I got caught in an illusion. My senses couldn't see through it. That was quite unsettling.

Of course, I immediately detected the magical incongruity, but unlike with the Power of Observation, I couldn't instantly discern the inside story.

[May I ask why?]

"Of course. But the reason isn't particularly special. Being under the direct command of the Chairman of the Association, the Executive Department, may sound grand, but fundamentally, we are civil servants."

Maxwell spoke with a dismissive shake of his head.

"Civil servants, in the end, just follow orders from above."

[Orders from above.]

[I understand there are only a few superior to you, Maxwell.]

The departments of the association are diverse, and thus intertwined with

various directive systems.

The Executive Department is different.

They prioritize the Chairman's instructions even over the directives of the association's decision-making body, the 'Main Councilors.'

In other words…

"Yes, as explained earlier, I am part of the Executive Department under the direct command of the Chairman… in other words, I follow the Chairman's orders."

The Chairman. The Executive Department that carries out their orders.

In the original work, when trying to meet the Tower Masters, the association's headquarters was primarily targeted.

The idea was to work backward from the Executive Department to see if it was possible to meet the Tower Masters of Space and Harmony.

I captured Maxwell and other members of the Executive Department, interrogated and executed them, but never got to meet them…

'……'

The Tower Master of Space and the Tower Master of Harmony…

I corrected my expression from hardening involuntarily.

[Then, was your action just now an order from the Chairman?]

"Strictly speaking, yes."

Maxwell affirmed with a peculiar smile.

It wasn't an outright affirmation.

Maxwell took another sip of tea.

“When encountering a special admission student, use an illusion to initially conceal yourself. If discovered, disclose the instruction and follow the directives below…”

After a brief pause, the explanation continued.

“There are several directives below, but the part I wish to convey now is separate.”

And then.

“The instruction was received approximately 13 years ago from now. It was also the last directive conveyed to the Executive Department.”

[Excuse me?]

“I had a similar reaction to you, hero. It was bewildering to first hear about a future directive so unexpectedly.”

The subsequent explanation left me completely startled. Maxwell nodded, understanding my reaction.

I couldn’t immediately respond to him.

’13 years ago?’

The Chairman supposedly gave orders to Maxwell.

If you meet me… the special admission student, conceal yourself. If discovered, explain the situation and follow the directives below.

The problem is that the directive was given over a decade ago. And since then, the Chairman has maintained complete silence with no further instructions.

‘Future foresight?’

Glimpsing the future is exceedingly difficult, but in this world, it’s not entirely impossible.

Though the method is absurdly complex, and the information is limited, it’s theoretically feasible.

‘If it’s a power… ’

Above all, they are Tower Masters. While their full strength is unknown, the idea of future foresight doesn’t seem entirely out of reach.

So, did they know about the current situation since 13 years ago?

No, even beyond that.

Could they be aware of the impending invasion of the Towers? If so, why are they still silent now? Is there a reason they must remain silent?

“May I continue with the explanation?”

[Please go ahead.]

“Understood. Please excuse me for a moment.”

Upon receiving my permission, Maxwell reached into his pocket and took out something.

It was a card about the size of a palm, with a black background adorned with gold decorations. The magical energy flowing over it was quite unusual.

At a glance, it seemed like an extraordinary item.

[What is this?]

“It’s a kind of credential.”

He offered the card to me.

As I accepted it with curiosity, he continued to explain about the certificate.

“In simple terms, it’s an identification card usable within the Association, along with the highest priority directive authority.”

[Directive authority?]

[What does that mean?]

“As it sounds, it contains the authority needed to mobilize the association’s personnel. For reference, the issuer is the Chairman of the Association.”

‘…?’

My fingers froze as I rubbed the card. After giving it some thought, the words I heard hadn’t changed.

Directive authority to mobilize association personnel.

And it’s the ‘highest priority’ authority issued directly by the Chairman.

If his words are true, any directive I issue with this card would take precedence over ones issued by the Main Councilors of the Association.

In other words, authority similar to that of the Chairman.

It was an absurd item.

[Why give me this?]

I asked, trying hard to control my face from trembling with disbelief.

“It’s a directive from 13 years ago.”

It was linked to the answer earlier.

If the illusion is discovered, explain the situation and execute the directives below.

One of those directives is precisely the transfer of this authority.

'…What is this.'

I wasn't particularly worried about meeting members of the Association.

The initial purpose itself was a meeting to compensate for the Shipnaha incident.

Having made a clear contribution, I aimed to receive an artifact or two held by the Association and make a few requests…

But suddenly, I ended up receiving directive authority from the Association…

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After a short while, I managed to collect my thoughts.

And though I posed a few questions to Maxwell, I didn't receive satisfactory answers.

Maxwell also didn't know why the Chairmen remain silent.

[May I ask a few favors?]

"Yes, of course."

[Could you create a few identities for me?]

In the end, I left the café as if fleeing. Before that, I had made requests regarding the schedule to receive compensation from the association's

headquarters and the identity issues for Seo-yul and myself.

The purpose of the meeting was achieved, at least. Of course, I've gained so much that it feels like my head might explode…

The time was early evening. It wasn't dark yet, and the sky was tinged with an orange sunset.

Dragging my feet, I returned to the dormitory.

[Cadet Lee Hayul, verified.]

As I held the hologram projector, the entrance door opened.

Just before I carelessly kicked off my shoes and entered.

I infused myself with cleansing magic before stepping inside.

"You're back?"

Then, Elia, who was sitting on the living room sofa, got up and walked over with light steps.

In her arms, Lee Seo-yul, asleep, was with her.

"You came back later than you mentioned…"

As she approached with quick steps, Elia stopped abruptly.

Blinking her yellow eyes, she reached out with a worried expression to touch my cheek.

"Hayul, you look incredibly pale. Is there anywhere you feel unwell?"

[No.]

[Just a bit dizzy.]

I was a bit mentally exhausted. There was a lot to think about.

There are facts that have been revealed this time, but since there are also increased questions, my feelings are complicated.

“Today, it’d be good for you to sleep early.”

At my response, Elia suggested it would be best to sleep early today and gently pushed me towards the bathroom.

After washing up, I was again pushed onto the bed.

[Wait…]

“No waiting. You haven’t had any sleep for days while taking care of Seo-yul, right? That’s why you’re so tired.”

[I need to look after Seo-yul…]

Though like an angel, Seo-yul hadn’t caused any fuss yet, some unforeseen event could occur while I’m asleep…

“I’ll look after Seo-yul while you sleep, so don’t worry and get some rest.”

Elia, dismissing my worry in an instant, lightly pushed me onto the bed.

Simultaneously, she changed Seo-yul into pajamas and laid it in the cradle she brought into the room.

And then, Elia herself lay down beside me.

The bed was quite spacious due to its luxury, leaving plenty of room.

“There, now it’s settled, right? Even if you fall asleep, I’ll take care of Seo-yul, so relax and go to sleep.”

I stared blankly, opening and closing my mouth at Elia’s words.

Something felt off about her words, but my mind was too foggy to think clearly.

A large blanket covered me. It was warmed by a person's body heat. The warmth seeped into my body, causing my thoughts to become even more stagnant.

'I'm sleepy… '

As my body warmed up, drowsiness overwhelmed me. It wasn't uncomfortable. I instinctively felt I wouldn't have nightmares this time.

'…It should be okay… '

Seo-yul is right next to me, and if anything happens, the Power of Observation, which operates 24 hours, will awaken my consciousness.

Moreover, with Elia by my side… it should be fine.

I let go of the thread of consciousness I had been clinging to.

My consciousness gradually sank.

The sensation of someone gently patting me accelerated it.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul→Elia Slade

[●●●●●●●○○○(76▷77/100)]

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Chick] [Guilt]

…

[Player Adjustment System: Exploration Level]

[Quest [Permission Transfer] completed]

…

[Points are accumulating]

…

[Points are being used]

.

.

.

-Ding? Ding? Ding?

[The Tower Master of Harmony…]

….

…

.

[What?]

[&? Why look at &Taechang?]

[Setting* Time$ @Main& Step#$?]

[This& Already#]

…

CHAPTER 130
VACATION CEREMONY

Early morning.

“Ba-aa…”

Lee Seo-yul stretched out its arms.

With a motion I had grown accustomed to, I picked up Lee Seo-yul. The baby wriggled in my embrace, snuggling in with a familiar movement.

I observed with a peculiar expression, carefully noting the sensation in my arms.

The weight on my forearms had increased since before.

Even the body nestled in my arms had grown larger.

The limbs were stretching, and the height had increased. Overall, it had grown.

There was no need to employ the Power of Observation. Even an ordinary person could easily notice the difference with a casual glance.

That wasn’t all.

After patting its back a few times, I carefully placed Lee Seo-yul on the ground.

And then.

“Uu-uu…”

Lee Seo-yul stood up on its two legs. The pure white hair, almost reaching its waist, gently settled down.

The soles of its feet touched the ground, and its legs straightened. Though it wobbled slightly, it stood on its legs.

This was a baby that had been crawling just a few days ago.

[Wow]

[Our Seo-yul stood up?]

“Yes! I-I stood up!”

[Amazing!]

Smiling brightly, I praised Lee Seo-yul and patted its head.

‘Seo-yul is growing so fast… ’

I hid my bewilderment inside.

Children grow quickly. Especially babies, who visibly grow with just a little passage of time.

Lee Seo-yul is a fairy. I knew they grow faster than humans.

Now that I’m experiencing it firsthand, I feel bewildered in various ways.

The interval was barely about two weeks.

In that time, the baby that had been crawling now stood tall on its own legs.

It’s an astonishing growth speed.

While I was taken aback, I could only praise Lee Seo-yul for standing.

‘What should I do about this… ’

I felt a sense of helplessness.

Lee Seo-yul is growing at an incredible speed.

As the body grows, naturally, so does the mind that moves it.

Though I've only brushed the surface, I've looked into childcare. Since Lee Seo-yul was born, I've foregone sleep to absorb childcare knowledge.

Though my knowledge is still quite lacking…

I know that the emotions and experiences a baby undergoes in the early years, and the bond with the caregiver, are extremely important for emotional development.

Especially since Lee Seo-yul is not only a different species but also grows quickly.

It's even more crucial to care for it attentively and teach various things during this period…

"Hayul, are you all set? It's about time to head out."

[I'm all ready.]

This inadequate and worthless guardian is planning to be absent for the next month or so.

Elia emerged from the empty room, not in casual or cadet attire, but in ceremonial dress.

Unlike the neat and tidy cadet uniform, the ceremonial dress was adorned with various embellishments.

…The body's curves were quite accentuated, so the impression of luxurious embellishments was somewhat diminished…

The ceremonial dress is provided along with the cadet uniform and is instructed to be worn on days with special events.

I, too, was dressed the same.

Suppressing a sigh that threatened to rise, I stood up.

Lee Seo-yul, who had been smiling brightly, suddenly pouted.

Its cheeks puffed up, displaying its dissatisfaction openly.

“That’s… too much.”

And unlike usual, the white eyes welled up with moisture, and my heart sank.

It felt like my heart was being torn apart. It was a sensation far more shocking than having a chunk of flesh gouged by Aerulus’s claws.

[I’m sorry…]

Before I knew it, I knelt down and embraced the sulking Lee Seo-yul.

Today is the end of the break.

It’s the day of the vacation ceremony, marking the end of the first semester.

.

.

.

“…Before we proceed, I’d like to commend the cadets who have honed their bodies and minds to become heroes over the past semester.”

The vacation ceremony was held in a grand auditorium.

The host was, as with the freshman welcome ceremony, the Vice-Principal.

She stood on the platform, delivering her address with the same impassive face as always.

The Vice-Principal's voice, amplified by magical devices, resonated through the corners of the auditorium.

The difference from the freshman welcome ceremony was that it included not only first-year students but also those from other grades.

Each grade was seated in separate sections.

Other sections were occupied by faculty and staff, among whom were Professor Liana and my mentor.

There were about 600 first-year students, with fewer in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years. Some 3rd and 4th-year students were away on external activities and not present in Shio-ram.

Though fewer than the first-year, each grade numbered in the hundreds.

The auditorium was large enough to accommodate such a crowd with some room to spare, but it still felt bustling.

With a renewed feeling, I used the Power of Observation to scan the faces of the cadets gathered in the auditorium.

There were cadets from the Ipchun class I saw every school day, and main characters I hadn't yet built much rapport with.

There were also main characters from different grades I hadn't had the chance to meet.

Among them, two individuals particularly caught my attention.

'Katsuki Yusei.'

A male cadet with hair and eyes like a subtle moonlight and a sharp impression, regarded as an exceptional prospect even among the Tri-Sword.

Since he was knocked unconscious by Hong Yeon-hwa during the freshman welcome ceremony and accidentally collided with me, leading to a formal apology, we hadn't had much interaction.

At most, we exchanged greetings each morning.

'The incident within the Tri-Sword faction happens during the first semester break.'

Tri-Sword is a martial faction representing Japan, with a recurring incident during the first semester break every year.

If handled well, it could form good relations with Tri-Sword and its affiliated factions.

But there wasn't time for that now.

I even considered giving a heads-up to Katsuki Yusei, but quickly discarded the idea.

Even if my status is somewhat extraordinary, there was no expectation of gaining trust by talking about an incident that hadn't happened yet.

Though an accident, there weren't many casualties. It had been resolved on its own in playthroughs where the player didn't intervene, so it should be fine.

And… the other person was Choi Jiyeon.

As always, she had her brown hair tied back appropriately, with light green eyes.

Though her expression seemed indifferent, there was a subtle hint of boredom on her face.

I operated the Observation with detail to examine her closely.

The magic contained in her body. Its peculiar nature naturally drew attention without conscious effort.

Just as Gop-hwa embodies fiery energy, Changhae embodies water and coldness, Choi Jiyeon's magic, as the manifestation of Taesan, bore the aura of earth.

Though her unique ability 'Taesan' was observed, proper information couldn't be gathered since it wasn't in full operation.

That was quite unfortunate.

The dominion over earth that Taesan possesses. The manipulation of vitality and necromancy stemming from it would surely be a great enhancement to my power.

'Will I meet her in the second semester?'

According to my plan, we should meet then.

"…Next, we will conduct a ceremony for the cadets who have shown outstanding achievements. Cadets whose names are called, please come up to the platform."

The vacation ceremony was reaching its conclusion.

After a brief address, it was a procedure to call cadets with excellent grades to the platform for praise and certificates.

The order began with the first-year.

About ten cadets per grade were selected to come up to the platform.

"Baek Ahrin. This cadet, as the admission top student of Shio-ram's 121st class, ranked 1st in the academic evaluation, 2nd in practical, 1st overall, and

runner-up in the first semester tournament, has demonstrated exceptional achievements, proving the qualities of a future hero."

"I will continue to strive."

Naturally, Baek Ahrin, the top student of the grade, went up.

After reviewing the achievements of the cadet and announcing them, the Vice-Principal tapped the cadet's shoulder with an old-fashioned magic staff.

It resembled a simplified version of a knighting ceremony.

"Hong Yeon-hwa. This cadet, the second top of Shio-ram's 121st class, ranked 11th in the academic evaluation, 1st in practical, 2nd overall, and winner of the first semester tournament, has shown exceptional achievements, proving the qualities of a future hero."

"I will strive."

First-year includes the top and second top students, Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin.

"Katsuki Yusei. This cadet…"

"Lee Hyun. This cadet…"

The rest of the honorees were main characters I hadn't yet built friendships with.

And then.

"Lee Hayul."

I also went up to the platform.

Numerous gazes flew in my direction. I had felt many eyes on me even while standing among the first-year cadets, but now the attention was even more

intense.

I stood in front of the Vice-Principal on the platform.

The Vice-Principal's violet eyes quietly observed me.

Her mouth, which had been closed for a moment, opened as the awarding ceremony continued.

"This cadet, through special admission to Shio-ram's 121st class, ranked 9th in the academic evaluation, 3rd in practical, 7th overall, and reached the round of 16 in the first semester tournament—"

I felt a complex emotion at the explanation given by the Vice-Principal.

As someone who crash-landed into this world and started learning from scratch, I felt satisfaction with my current grades.

But as someone who will stand against the monsters that will one day devastate the world, I also felt dissatisfaction with my current grades.

'…The latter is probably the better feeling.'

It would be better to feel dissatisfied with the present and strive harder than to feel content and complacent.

As the Vice-Principal's explanation neared its end, I prepared to control the Necklace of Confession.

I should just say I'll strive further like those before me.

"—demonstrated exceptional achievement, proving the qualities of a future hero."

Tap- The staff touched my right shoulder.

The Vice-Principal's explanation ended.

Now to receive the certificate…

“And furthermore.”

‘?’

The Vice-Principal’s words continued beyond that point.

“The hero.”

From cadet to hero.

The designation changed.

“From a distant land, faced with a disaster, you dedicated yourself for the innocent and powerless.”

Tap- The staff touched my left shoulder. The emptiness reminded me of the limpness of my sleeve.

“This is an act that all will acknowledge as the footsteps of a hero, and the trajectory of a legend the hero will carve out.”

The staff that had pressed on my shoulder came down. The Vice-Principal grasped the staff with both hands.

“…Thus, as a proxy for the Principal of Shio-ram, Vice-Principal Venus Litera blesses the hero’s great achievements in this place.”

With those words, the Vice-Principal bowed her head slightly.

The auditorium fell into silence.

And then.

– Clap clap clap clap—!

As if it had been prearranged, everyone seated began standing one by one

and clapping.

The thunderous and countless applause echoed in my ears like lightning.

Among them, the sound of camera shutters clicked in.

[Uh… oh…]

I stood there, mouth agape, at the unexpected scene.

My head felt faint.

* * *

[The Tower Master of Harmony nods proudly]

…

[The Tower Master of Harmony subtly manifests the power [Harmony]]

[Using points]

[The Tower Master of Harmony modifies the system…]

[…]

[…]

[…Failure]

[The Tower Master of Harmony clutches at its hair]

[#^#$Arrgh!]

[*Enough$!]

[Using points]

CHAPTER 131
THE GOP-HWA CLAN (1)

After the shocking vacation ceremony, cadets poured out like a flood.

The crowd stretched out in the same direction, their steps light.

It was towards the Gate Terminal. The gate is the only way to leave Shio-ram.

Most cadets return to their hometowns to heal their tired bodies and minds from the intense studies, while some will engage in personal training outside Shio-ram, maintaining the blessing of growth.

The blessing of growth persists outside Shio-ram. Without it, external training would be impossible.

I surveyed the long line of people with my observation.

I did not join that procession.

After the vacation ceremony ended, I visited my mentor to say goodbye. We wouldn't be able to meet during the break anyway.

"—Don't skip meals just because you're lazy, make sure to eat properly. Just in case, take some sleep medicine with you. And…"

I was met with a lot of concern and advice the moment we met.

When I squirmed slightly, the hand that was stroking my head moved down to pat my back. I felt a sense of relaxation.

I had informed my mentor about my plans to leave Shio-ram during the break right after graduating from The Tower of Growth. At that time, my mentor just nodded, saying "I see…"

"……"

My mentor now swallowed yet another sigh.

Though she held back, it seemed she was anxious about me leaving Shioram.

I understood her feelings.

I had ended up in such a state after just one outing, so it was natural for a mentor raising a disciple to worry.

In truth, I was about to head to a rather dangerous place…

But if I confessed this, my mentor might drag me back to my dorm with lifeless eyes like before.

[Yes]

[I will definitely keep your words in mind]

[You don't need to worry]

While I appreciated the concerned strokes, I couldn't stay like this forever.

Regardless of my inner feelings, I outputted reassuring words through the Necklace of Confession.

My mentor looked at the necklace with eyes dripping with reluctance before taking a step back and swallowing another sigh.

"…Yes, I shouldn't keep you any longer. But remember this. If something dangerous happens… always think of yourself first."

"Come on. What could possibly happen within our clan?"

At that moment.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been standing with her arms crossed behind us, grumbled discontentedly.

When I mentioned I'd briefly greet my mentor, Hong Yeon-hwa decided to accompany me, saying she'd be back soon.

"An accident is something that can happen anytime, anywhere."

My mentor glanced at Hong Yeon-hwa and shook her head.

"Being too complacent can lead to great disaster."

"If I'm shaking at the thought of disaster in the Gop-hwa main house, hasn't the world already ended…?"

'That's true.'

During the brief exchange, I made a peculiar expression at Hong Yeon-hwa's words.

If the main house of the three major clans were to be attacked, the world would already be in a catastrophic state.

[Then]

[I'll be on my way]

"Go and return safely."

My mentor, who had been having a minor argument with Hong Yeon-hwa, hesitated and then patted my head with a complex expression.

"I'll take good care of him, so don't worry."

At that moment.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been making a strange face, took a step forward and lightly placed her hand on my shoulder.

My mentor’s face crumpled.

.

.

.

Though some time had passed since the vacation ceremony ended, the Gate Terminal was still bustling with people.

The Gate Terminal serves as an airport in this world, with gates and space instead of runways, and a duty-free shop is present.

However, the Gate Terminal at Shio-ram is smaller compared to other Gate Terminals.

Since only a few people can come here in the first place, there’s no need to construct a huge facility.

Also, naturally, proper identification is required to use the gate.

This is why I asked Maxwell for Lee Seo-yul’s identification a few days ago.

Without identification, Lee Seo-yul couldn’t leave Shio-ram.

Even if I created an ordinary identity, there would be many issues.

The person to be registered as the guardian was a problem, and even if I made one, issues would arise later due to the different species.

Fortunately, Maxwell said he’d handle that part.

Thanks to him, Lee Seo-yul now has an identity, and Maxwell has arranged things so there shouldn’t be any problems using the gate.

‘…I hope they’re managing well.’

So there shouldn't be any problems using the gate with Elia. Elia's parents also said they would sincerely take care of the benefactor's family, so there shouldn't be any issues during the break.

…Of course, even with this in mind, my heart felt heavy. I really was a hopeless fool.

I can't hide the existence of Lee Seo-yul forever. At the very least, I should inform those around me… like Hong Yeon-hwa and my mentor.

These past few days have been too hectic, so I couldn't inform them. I plan to let them know once I finish everything during the break and return.

"Young Master, please hand over your luggage. I'll handle the procedures."

[Thank you]

[Ariel]

"Ariel, mine too… No, hey! You should take care of mine too!"

Ariel accompanied us on the way to the Gop-hwa clan. It was only natural since she was assisting Hong Yeon-hwa.

– Uuuuuu…

After waiting a while, the procedures were finished, and it was our turn. The luggage had already been sent to the destination, so we only needed to go ourselves.

"Let's go, Hayul."

[Yes]

I moved towards the gate.

As I got closer to the blue swirling gate, the resonance of space touched my

senses. With the Power of Observation, familiar information entered my mind.

It was a technique using the Power of Space, creating an artificial rift between two spaces and connecting them.

After observing this briefly, I followed Hong Yeon-hwa's lead and threw myself towards the gate.

I plunged into the vortex, and after a moment, my feet touched the ground.

The observed information updated itself.

A large-scale Gate Terminal. The gates opened and closed relentlessly, and numerous presences, like swarms of ants, filled the place.

The designs and colors of the various vehicles and skyscraper-like walls unfolded from outside the facility.

The destination… Seoul Gate Terminal, had been reached.

"Ugh, my head…"

Hong Yeon-hwa frowned, rubbing her philtrum at the dizziness unique to gates.

Upon arriving at the destination, Ariel guided us to the waiting vehicle.

The vehicle was, by my standards, a modern-designed limousine.

The chauffeur, who got out of the driver's seat, bowed his head.

"It is an honor to escort the young lady and young master. I will ensure a safe and comfortable journey to your destination."

"Yes, please take care of us."

[Young Master…]

[Please… take care of us]

Despite the polite and somewhat burdensome greeting, Hong Yeon-hwa accepted it as if she was used to it and got into the limousine. I hesitantly followed her inside.

The interior of the limousine looked just like what one might often see in creative works, with bright red sofa seats surrounding a circular table.

Under the table was a storage compartment and a refrigerator, packed with snacks and various drinks and alcoholic beverages.

What I could see with my observation was not just the exterior and internal state.

The limousine was made with an alloy of sturdy minerals and magical stones, incorporating a high level of defensive magic, making it practically a tank.

“Hayul, you can sit here.”

As I hesitated, wondering where to sit, Hong Yeon-hwa tapped the seat next to her.

“If you need anything or feel uncomfortable, just let me know. There are snacks here, so feel free to help yourself.”

[Thank you]

As I sat down, she immediately rummaged through the storage and handed me some snacks.

“Huh?”

At that moment.

As Hong Yeon-hwa handed me the snacks, she turned to look at Ariel, who

sat opposite.

Ariel wore a somewhat shocked and emotional expression.

"…Why do you have that look on your face?"

"I am moved."

"Moved? Elaborate."

"I, Ariel, have served the young lady for many years, but I never imagined I would witness the young lady considering someone else with such care."

"Are you saying I don't know how to consider others and have a… despicable personality?"

"It's not an insult; it's admiration. Anyway, I would like to guide the young master through the schedule."

Hong Yeon-hwa clicked her tongue, leaning back into the sofa. Ariel turned her gaze to me.

"The schedule is as previously informed. The Gop-hwa clan will treat you as an honored guest, and once you have rested and are ready, you can proceed with the evaluation at your convenience."

[Thank you for your consideration]

"Please extend such gratitude to the young lady and the hostess. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, there will be a banquet in a few days."

'Banquet.'

At that word, I made a peculiar expression.

I heard that my visit coincided slightly with the Gop-hwa clan's regular

banquet day.

Since I'm visiting the Gop-hwa clan as an important guest.

The clan considers not inviting an important guest to a major banquet as equivalent to treating them as a minor visitor.

So Hong Yeon-hwa had nervously asked if I would consider attending the banquet, even for a short while.

Judging by the look of things, if I refused, they would find themselves in a tough spot, so I accepted.

I remember Hong Yeon-hwa's face lighting up instantly when I agreed.

'And… '

I recalled the purpose of my visit to the Gop-hwa clan.

The Gop-hwa that manifested inside The Tower of Growth. At that time, it was full of questions, so I agreed to the evaluation, but now I know the reason.

The reason I could manifest Gop-hwa was ultimately thanks to Homogenization. Perhaps because I subconsciously imagined powerful fire, Homogenization mimicked and manifested Gop-hwa.

In this way, I've found the reason for the Gop-hwa manifestation even before undergoing evaluation.

When I think about it, there's no real reason to visit the Gop-hwa clan.

But there is another reason.

'The burn on my right arm.'

I flicked my fingers. Though currently covered by a sleeve, beneath it lay a

hand marred with hideous burn scars.

According to Hong Yeon-hwa, this scar was caused by Gop-hwa.

In other words, if her words are correct, I've been injured by Gop-hwa before.

It's strange.

In my original world, I suffered burns and was left with scars. My original world is a mundane world where supernatural abilities are unknown.

'…In this world… '

Records of Lee Hayul in this world. The first record was of a dying child found near an orphanage.

According to the records, even then, this world's 'Lee Hayul' already had burn marks identical to mine on his right hand, was blind, and mute.

'Sigh… '

The information is incredibly confusing.

So visiting the Gop-hwa clan was necessary to gather some information.

Even if I don't obtain any information, visiting the Gop-hwa clan will yield many things naturally.

"We have arrived."

"This time it feels like we returned quickly."

At Ariel's words, Hong Yeon-hwa turned her head to look out the window.

Before I knew it, the limousine was driving along a towering wall.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't a wall; it was more like a stone rampart.

Using more in-depth observation, I sensed an invisible, colorless barrier emanating from the stone rampart.

The stone rampart was one of the mediums maintaining and amplifying the barrier.

This is the external barrier protecting the Gop-hwa clan's main house, a protection barrier so powerful that the term 'infinite' would need to be used several times.

We drove along the stone rampart for a while before the main gate entered my observation range.

'…?'

And I observed a crowd waiting inside the main gate.

The limousine entered through the main gate and stopped.

Click- The locked door opened on its own.

"Please disembark."

Hong Yeon-hwa got out first. I followed her out.

As soon as we stepped onto the well-maintained, vibrant grass.

– ♬──!

The lively sound of instruments forcefully hit my ears.

A red carpet stretched towards the grand mansion, with people lined up on either side.

At least a dozen people dressed in red uniforms, holding brass instruments to their mouths, were accompanied by many others carrying various instruments behind them.

The music they collectively created resonated throughout the surroundings.

A short performance unfolded unexpectedly.

Soon, the performance ceased, and the person in front stepped forward.

Then, bowing deeply at a ninety-degree angle, they shouted loudly.

“We sincerely welcome the return of the heir who will bear the Gop-hwa and the visit of the young master, Lee Hayul—!!!”

“”“Welcome—!!”“”

An incredible volume spread throughout the area, even considering they were superhuman.

[What’s]

“……”

My expression naturally turned blank.

Hong Yeon-hwa approached, awkwardly patting my shoulder.

“Ahem. I said they could skip this part…”

“Excuse me? You instructed us to prepare properly since the young master accompanied you…”

“Quiet.”

…Anyway, we moved forward, receiving a grand welcome.

* * *

[The Power [Space] grows]

…

[Player Adjustment System: Progress]

[Quest [Visit the Gop-hwa Clan] completed]

…

…

[Player Adjustment System: Affection]

Lee Hayul → Atra Clyde

●●●●●●●●○○(84▷85/100)

[Master] [Expectation] [Sense of Security] [Yearning for Affection] [Respect]

…

[Condition for the release of [Curse of Silence] not met]

[Condition for the release of [Curse of Loneliness] not met]

CHAPTER 132
THE GOP-HWA CLAN (2)

The political system of this world is not democracy.

Those who reign as authorities are not elected officials but superhumans with immense power, and the forces they lead.

It resembles a society with a class system from the past.

Governments collapsed long ago, and superhuman forces took their place.

Such forces settle in specific regions, claiming them as their domains.

Superhumans rule over the governing class, protecting ordinary people from external threats like monsters, while ordinary people accept a world dominated by superhumans for survival.

Commoners and residents are ordinary people of the region.

Kings and nobles are the superhumans of that force.

The superhumans who form a domain wield authority akin to kings and nobles.

Many places form a kind of lawless zone where even the influence of the Association doesn't reach.

These places become desolate to the point of ruin due to the lack of proper institutions, and when violent forces settle in, the area becomes a living hell.

Currently, the world is maintained by the Association's ability to moderate and ensure that such forces do not cross the line.

‘The Gop-hwa’s sphere of influence… It felt more developed.’

Among them, the Gop-hwa Clan stands out as a major force.

The surrounding cities were developed, and the Gop-hwa main house was grand in scale, as if to prove its might.

Spacious. Vast. Enormous.

These thoughts kept arising as I entered the Gop-hwa Clan’s premises.

Having visited the mansion, it was basic etiquette to meet the owner first and greet them.

After a rather blunt welcome, I left my luggage with the staff and followed Hong Yeon-hwa into the mansion.

And it took quite some time.

I walked for quite a while along the red carpet laid out in the corridors, but still hadn’t reached the destination.

The mansion was so vast and enormous that it was hard to determine the number of rooms; just the doors we passed surely exceeded a hundred.

In fact, calling it a mansion wasn’t quite right.

Given its size, castle would be more appropriate, and considering the built-in defenses, fortress would be even more fitting.

‘A fortress… ’

From the materials of the mansion itself, which were chosen for defense, to the magic cast upon it, all were protection and defense magic.

Considering the personnel continuously patrolling the interior and exterior of the mansion and their levels, calling it a fortress is indeed accurate.

Even the “Diamond Warrior” of the 11th cycle took considerable time to penetrate this place.

Though it was before reaching full growth at that time, the defense facility was such that even the Diamond Warrior took time to breakthrough.

Right now, even thinking of breaching it would be a distant dream.

“Hello, Young Mistress!”

This thought kept recurring as every staff member encountered in the corridor bowed deeply and greeted Hong Yeon-hwa.

Hong Yeon-hwa, accustomed to this, received the greetings suitably and continued walking.

I felt a peculiar sensation from this.

It made me realize anew Hong Yeon-hwa’s status.

Though usually laid-back, Hong Yeon-hwa is the heiress of the Gop-hwa Clan, destined to become one of the top authorities in this world.

A single word from Hong Yeon-hwa could easily cost several lives.

Walking beside her, holding her hand, I felt a sense of stability.

In the past, I felt fear and tension due to Hong Yeon-hwa’s status, but now, I feel comfort and calm from the warmth of her hand.

Perhaps because this place is unfamiliar to me, Hong Yeon-hwa beside me feels even more reliable.

It’s truly a strange sensation, something unthinkable in the past.

And…

“Hello, Young Master.”

'……'

Simultaneously with Hong Yeon-hwa, the staff also bowed politely to me, making me feel strange.

Of course, it's not unusual for the mansion staff to show courtesy to guests… but the degree of courtesy shown was something else.

Perhaps it's because I'm not used to such treatment.

It's quite awkward.

After walking for some time, I arrived at the upper floor of the building, facing a luxurious door.

Even without using observation, I could clearly understand who was inside from the conversation between Ariel and Hong Yeon-hwa.

– Knock, knock

"Head Mistress, the Young Mistress and Young Master have arrived."

– Come in.

At Ariel's knock, a response came from inside.

At this, Ariel opened the door and stepped aside.

Hong Yeon-hwa boldly stepped through the open door.

Following her unwavering steps, I cautiously entered as well.

Amidst a mountain of documents, a woman came into my view.

Black hair reaching shoulder length.

Choi Jiyeon, who had been looking at the documents with a bored expression, raised her head.

Her inorganic brown eyes blinked once.

Choi Jiyeon, the Head Mistress.

She is the woman engaged to the head of the Gop-hwa Clan and the mother of Hong Yeon-hwa.

'Sigh… '

I felt a natural rise of tension.

Was it because she is the Head Mistress?

That's part of it.

There's no need to mention the influence of the Gop-hwa Clan, and Choi Jiyeon holds substantial power as the Head Mistress of that clan.

She is someone who can take lives without much issue.

That's not the only reason for my tension.

More than that, it was because she is Hong Yeon-hwa's mother.

I have never made friends in my previous world, let alone met any friend's parents.

Due to this lack of experience, I couldn't help but feel nervous in many ways.

"Come in. You arrived earlier than I thought. And…"

Choi Jiyeon rose from her seat.

Her eyes, which had been on Hong Yeon-hwa, shifted to me.

After observing me for a moment, Choi Jiyeon bowed her head.

"Thank you for gracing us with your esteemed presence. I am Choi Jiyeon,

the Head Mistress of the Gop-hwa Clan. Mr. Lee Hayul."

It was a more polite greeting than expected.

I was taken aback and hurriedly bowed my head as well.

[Thank you for the invitation]

[I am Lee Hayul, a friend of Miss Hong Yeon-hwa]

"A friend, indeed…"

Choi Jiyeon briefly glanced at Hong Yeon-hwa.

Her gaze was quite peculiar, as if she were looking at something pitiful.

Choi Jiyeon, seemingly about to say something, shook her head.

"…Never mind."

"Why, what. Why are you looking at me like that and then stop talking?"

After exchanging a few words, we sat across the table.

Choi Jiyeon sat opposite, and Hong Yeon-hwa tapped the seat beside her.

As soon as I sat down, the sharp gaze of Choi Jiyeon softened a bit.

"Is there a type of tea you particularly enjoy?"

[No]

[I am not familiar with tea]

"In that case, I'll prepare the same tea as the Young Mistress."

Soon, Ariel brought tea and snacks.

Both Choi Jiyeon and Hong Yeon-hwa sipped their tea.

Following their lead, I took the tea to my lips.

It's warm water.

"Firstly, I must apologize."

After moistening her throat with tea, Choi Jiyeon continued speaking.

"It would be proper for the head of the mansion to greet such an esteemed guest, but as the head is currently absent, I, as the Head Mistress, am responding on his behalf."

[I am only grateful for such a grand reception]

"What? Is father still in the African Demonic Realm?"

At that, Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been listening, tilted her head.

"He went there at the beginning of the year, didn't he? How is he still subjugating after several months?"

"The subjugation itself ended a while ago, and they are now wrapping things up. However, due to some circumstances, he can't leave."

"Oh… Then what about the banquet? Are we proceeding without the head?"

"Probably."

'He's away.'

Listening to the ongoing conversation, I nodded inwardly.

Currently, there was no sign of the head within the mansion or its premises.

Even after expanding the scope of my observation to cover the city outside, there was no presence.

Currently, the head of the Gop-hwa Clan is Hong Yeon-hwa's father, Hong Jin-sun, an active top-level hero alleged to be on the verge of pioneering.

I was curious as to why there was no sign of such a person, but apparently, he's inside the African Demonic Realm.

'Circumstances?'

If he is in the demonic realm and unable to leave due to circumstances right now…

'Has he discovered a tower?'

There are two towers within the African Demonic Realm.

One is an undisclosed, unchallenged tower.

In the 8th cycle, they attempted to conquer it but retreated when their base was invaded.

After several attempts in subsequent cycles, they finally succeeded in the 11th cycle.

Clearing that tower grants a wish ticket, allowing the bearer to make a wish within the tower's capacity.

The other is… the Tower of Necromancy, which has yet to be invaded.

In the original story, the Tower of Necromancy is discovered around this time.

Though the identity isn't determined yet, its existence is confirmed and kept secret.

'……'

The Tower of Necromancy is the first to initiate an invasion and is located in

a very troublesome place.

Its location is unfortunately within the demonic realm, making it challenging to approach from this side.

Even beginning the invasion poses problems.

True to its name, the lord of the Tower of Necromancy is a necromancer-type boss.

He utilizes the corpses and souls of dead entities to build his army.

Unfortunately, he initiates the invasion from the monster-abundant interior of the demonic realm.

As a result, once the invasion begins, the African Demonic Realm effectively becomes the territory of the lord of the Tower of Necromancy.

"—Anyway, keep that in mind. And… Mr. Lee Hayul?"

[Yes]

"There are many things I wish to discuss, but it would be inappropriate to keep a guest who just arrived. Ariel will guide you to your room. Ariel?"

"Yes, I have received the instructions."

"Please take your time to relax, and let us know when you're ready for the verification. Preparations are complete, so you can begin whenever you feel comfortable."

[Thank you for your hospitality]

In response, Choi Jiyeon observed me for a moment before a faint smile appeared on her face.

* * *

After Lee Hayul and Ariel left the room, only the two of them remained in the Head Mistress's office.

"Given his upbringing, it's understandable for someone to go astray, but he's grown up to be so polite and well-mannered."

Choi Jiyeon, the Head Mistress, gazed at the softly closing door while sipping her tea.

The smile she had earlier vanished without a trace.

Across from her, Hong Yeon-hwa, sensing the atmosphere, quietly munched on her snacks without speaking.

"So? Have you brought it up?"

Choi Jiyeon, silently emptying her teacup, suddenly asked.

Though there was no subject or context, Hong Yeon-hwa understood the meaning.

It was about the engagement.

So she had nothing to say.

Hong Yeon-hwa mumbled, avoiding the direct gaze directed at her.

"…No."

"Sigh."

At the sound of the sigh that followed almost immediately, Hong Yeon-hwa's body flinched.

However, she couldn't protest.

"You didn't bring it up at all? Not even a word? During all that time?"

“Yep…”

“Oh dear…”

My goodness.

Choi Jiyeon downed her remaining tea as if her patience were wearing thin.

She wanted to cool down with something, but unfortunately, the tea was not refreshing.

Glancing across, she saw Hong Yeon-hwa, uncharacteristically shrunken and silent.

That sight made Choi Jiyeon ponder.

Typically, the child who acted like a rambunctious tomboy was powerless in this matter.

Having no experience and harboring such fresh feelings…

–… I avoided it because I felt like I might just pounce…

‘Fresh… well, it’s love at least. Hmm… ’

Whatever the case.

She assumed that in all that time, Hong Yeon-hwa would have brought it up and said everything, but she returned without uttering a word.

Choi Jiyeon realized that Hong Yeon-hwa needed some sort of shock to spur her into action.

“Yeon-hwa.”

“Yeah…”

“Are you just going to stay like this while someone else takes him away?”

As if asking casually about today's meal, the words struck Hong Yeon-hwa, causing her body to jolt.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection]

Lee Hayul → Hong Yeon-hwa

●●●●●●●●○○(85▷86/100)

[?] [Sense of Debt] [Gratitude] [Warmth] [Stability]

…

["Curse of the Beautiful Prodigy" consumes vitality…]

– Crackle…

[The Tower of Harmony suppresses the "Curse of the Beautiful Prodigy"]

[Using points]

…

[The Tower of Harmony lets out a screech]

CHAPTER 133
THE GOP-HWA CLAN (3)

I unpacked my belongings in the room Ariel guided me to.

Since my luggage only consisted of a few clothes that weren't stored in my subspace, it didn't take long.

'…Is this really just a room?'

I scanned the room with my observation.

It was so large and spacious that it could hardly be called a room. It was more like an individual house.

The furniture was also quite luxurious… It seemed incredibly valuable.

Though I had thought the mansion was enormous, it turns out even the guest rooms are at this level.

When I asked Ariel, she mentioned that not all guest rooms were like this.

Of course, there weren't many rooms of this size in the mansion.

"This is a room reserved for the most precious guests, those who may only come once or twice in a generation. The Head Mistress herself has stayed in this room before."

[I see.]

I nodded at her explanation.

Choi Jiyeon, the Head Mistress, was originally not a member of the Gop-hwa Clan.

She was a hero of some renown outside before marrying the current clan head, Hong Jin-sun, and becoming part of the Gop-hwa Clan.

Moreover, she discovered an unexpected talent — not in combat, but in administration and management — and fully utilized it to rise to the position of Head Mistress, overseeing the clan's affairs.

…However, I've heard that the position of Head Mistress is one that grinds people down.

Given the sheer scale of the Gop-hwa Clan, the workload assigned to the one overseeing it is beyond imagination.

My suspicion was confirmed when I saw the mountain of documents in her office earlier.

Because of this, Choi Jiyeon has always expressed a blatant desire to step down from the position of Head Mistress.

Even in the original story, after Hong Yeon-hwa ascended to the position of clan head, Choi Jiyeon remained as the Head Mistress…

I finished unpacking while listening to the explanation.

After a moment of thought, I asked Ariel.

[Would it be possible to conduct the verification this afternoon?]

"I will schedule it before the dinner banquet."

[Thank you.]

Ariel nodded immediately.

I asked because I didn't want to drag out the process, and fortunately, it seems it can be done soon.

‘Hmm… ’

I checked the time. There was still time before evening.

[Would it be alright if I looked around the area?]

Of course, I could just sit here and use my observation to scan most of the premises, but it would be better if I personally explored the surroundings.

“Yes, of course.”

Again, a positive answer came back.

I nodded and stood up from my seat.

.

.

.

The most prominent characteristic of the Gop-hwa Clan is always their combat power.

Starting with the clan head, who is among the powerful top-tier heroes, there are numerous combat units under his command capable of conducting solo operations in the demonic realm.

This is a trait that stems from the clan’s unique ability, which is highly specialized for combat.

This trait is evident in the criteria for becoming the head of the Gop-hwa Clan.

The essential requirement to become the head of the Gop-hwa Clan is martial strength.

While having knowledge, wisdom, and intelligence is beneficial, without

martial strength, it is ultimately impossible to ascend to the position of clan head.

That's how much importance the Gop-hwa Clan places on martial strength.

However, martial strength is not the only advantage of the Gop-hwa Clan.

– Clang! Clang! Clang!

The sound that reached my ears was quite intense.

The closer I got to the source of the sound, the more intense it became.

It was so intense that I worried prolonged exposure might cause hearing loss.

I scanned the building located on one side of the vast Gop-hwa Clan grounds.

A massive structure, built in a rugged style.

The central iron door was immensely thick, and from the tall chimneys installed on the roof, black smoke was billowing out.

A forge.

The loud clanging sound and the appearance of the building instantly brought a forge to mind.

I had already received permission to enter.

Instead of the massive central iron door, I entered through a smaller side door located in a corner.

– Fwoosh!

As soon as I opened the door, a wave of heat engulfed my entire body.

The heat seeped through my clothes, causing them to flutter, and the intense

warmth made my whole body feel uncomfortably warm. It was the kind of heat that could instantly burn an ordinary person.

I wasn't at risk of getting burned, but the heat made me feel sticky and uncomfortable.

Sweat trickled down my cheeks. I wiped it off with my hand and glanced at Ariel, who was standing a few steps behind me.

She didn't seem fazed at all. I didn't sense any magical protection either.

Though retired, it seems that her skills as a top-tier hunter hadn't faded.

'Hmm… '

I debated whether to neutralize the heat with magic, or perhaps wrap myself in the Wings of the Sky.

I considered it briefly but decided against it.

Instead of taking other measures, I chose to endure the heat and stepped inside.

The sound of my footsteps was drowned out by the loud and constant hammering.

The loudest sound was the hammering, followed by the roaring of the intense flames.

I had already confirmed with my observation that there were quite a few people inside.

The central area of the first floor was a kind of communal workspace.

While there were private workshops on the second floor, the first floor was also crowded with people.

They appeared to be blacksmiths.

In front of them was a solid anvil, with various tools scattered around.

When they brought down the heavy hammer in their hands, the red-hot metal between the hammer and anvil emitted a variety of sounds as it changed shape.

It was the typical image of a forge and blacksmiths that one would imagine. Yet, there were also scenes that defied common expectations.

I approached a blacksmith working in a corner. Without speaking, I stood a little away so as not to disturb his work.

The blacksmith was an old man.

His hair was streaked with gray, and his face was lined with the wrinkles of age.

But his physique was anything but frail, with immense muscles that seemed almost exaggerated.

The muscles in his arm, as he brought down the hammer, were thick and powerful, and even in front of the intense flames, though sweat trickled down his body, he didn't let out a single groan. His hammering remained steady and unwavering.

Right beside the blacksmith's workstation was a furnace.

The intense flames continually licked at the metal, melting it.

One of the blacksmiths reached out toward the furnace.

– Fwoosh!

The flames swelled, engulfing his hand.

A sight that would cause most people to scream and panic didn't even register with those around him.

To them, it was just a common occurrence, not a threat.

– Fwoosh…

The flames subsided.

The flames, which had swelled as they followed the blacksmith's hand, gradually calmed down, falling under his control.

It was a display of exceptional affinity with and control over fire.

Once the flames had noticeably calmed, no longer appearing threatening, the blacksmith nodded in satisfaction.

Then, flames erupted from the blacksmith's hand.

Intense flames poured into the furnace.

The flames, which had been simmering low, surged up again, this time with a noticeably different intensity.

Yet, they remained under the blacksmith's control.

After gauging the intensity of the flames, the blacksmith pushed the metal ingot into the furnace.

The metal ingot couldn't withstand the intensity of the flames and gradually began to melt.

'Gop-hwa.'

The flames flickering in the furnace were Gop-hwa.

The flames emanating from the old man's hand were also Gop-hwa.

In fact, most of the flames flickering in this space were Gop-hwa.

Though the Gop-hwa Clan is known for its combat prowess, another equally important trait is their metallurgy.

To work with metals, one needs fire, and Gop-hwa, considered the strongest flame in this world, is also an ideal material for metallurgy.

I hadn't learned much about crafting techniques. At most, I'd dabbled in some basic sewing or woodworking.

Even during the blank period, I only briefly touched on the theory of crafting techniques.

So, I couldn't fully comprehend the work being done in the forge.

It just seemed like molten metal was being hammered, quenched in water, reheated, hammered again, and then refined through various techniques.

I observed it all.

This wouldn't just remain as a fleeting memory; it would serve as reference material that I could revisit whenever I wanted.

"What do you see with your eyes closed?"

The old man I had been observing suddenly spoke. He wasn't asking who I was.

Despite the intense flames in front of him, his hammering remained steady.

[I'm not sure.]

[I can only feel it.]

"That's better than just wearing decorations."

I didn't bother to explain that I had sensory abilities.

But the old man seemed to understand and nodded.

He didn't ask further and continued moving his hands, bringing the hammer down on the metal and reshaping it.

The other blacksmiths were the same. They gripped their hammers, brought them down, and refined the metal.

The information I observed was vastly different.

The hammering of the old man was unlike the others. His process was different, and so were the results that followed.

I could tell from the information gathered through observation. This old man's skills were on a completely different level.

[May I continue watching?]

"Do as you please."

Though he seemed somewhat curt, his response was still positive.

I nodded and squatted nearby, focusing my observation more closely.

I continued to monitor the old man's movements.

Though I could barely understand most of what I saw, just watching his movements gave me a better understanding of metallurgy and crafting techniques.

Sitting here observing the blacksmiths' work was proving to be a valuable learning experience.

A tingling sensation ran through my head. I nodded, sensing the growth in one direction of my Jack of All Trades ability.

'So it's him.'

I had my suspicions, but it turns out, it really was him.

I observed the old man hammering at the anvil with a peculiar expression.

Tan Hwajoo, Hwa Byeok-un.

A master of metallurgy, one of the best in this world.

He's the Gop-hwa Clan's top blacksmith, responsible for crafting the exclusive armaments used by the current and several previous clan heads.

I quietly studied the old man's movements, squatting beside him.

* * *

[Unique Ability "Jack of All Trades" is growing.]

[Unique Ability "Mana Affinity" is growing.]

[Uni?ue Abi?i?y "?" is growing.]

CHAPTER 134
VERIFICATION

“It’s about time, Tan Hwajoo-nim.”

“I know.”

-Clang…

The steady sound of hammering halted. For a moment, it seemed as though all sound in the world had vanished.

In turn, my concentration was broken.

Though the hammering of other blacksmiths on the first floor continued to echo, none had the same crispness as the old man’s hammering.

The old man indifferently inspected the item he had crafted.

It was just a sword made by casually hammering an ingot.

The ingot I observed was of fairly good quality iron, but it wasn’t anything special or particularly rare.

It was the kind of iron that a small workshop could easily obtain with some effort.

Even though the sword crafted from that iron wasn’t given a proper finish, the blade gleamed sharply under the glow of the furnace.

Despite my limited experience with weapons and minimal exposure to a variety of arms, I could tell it was an excellent sword.

“Hmph. It turned out unsatisfactory.”

However, the old man seemed displeased. He looked at the sword he made with dissatisfaction, then casually leaned it against the wall and stood up.

Ariel glanced at the sword casually propped against the wall and remarked.

“Your evaluation of weapons remains as harsh as ever.”

“It’s not harsh; it’s the proper assessment.”

The old man clapped his hands together to dust them off and turned around. He glanced at Ariel before shifting his gaze toward me.

His grayish-white eyes focused on me. Despite having the dull gaze characteristic of the elderly, there was a strange vitality lurking behind them.

“A peculiar young lad.”

The old man, who had been observing me for a while as if assessing me, finally spoke something incomprehensible.

“Let’s go.”

After tidying up his tools and wiping his hands, the old man moved toward the side door.

He walked with confidence, and before I knew it, I found myself following him.

The sound of metal being hammered faded as we moved away from the workshop area.

I looked back with my observation and noticed that Ariel was also following the old man without a word. It didn’t seem like we were heading to an unusual place.

It was still daylight outside, but when I checked the clock, several hours had passed.

Even though I hadn't lost track of time while focusing, it had indeed been a while.

'A young lad… I suppose I am younger compared to him… '

I followed the old man with an odd expression.

Admittedly, I'm younger than him in appearance, but being treated like a child is somewhat unsettling.

It doesn't feel bad… just strange and bewildering.

"Did you learn something?"

Before I knew it, we had entered the mansion. The old man asked abruptly as he walked across the carpet.

Even though he must've seen that my eyes were closed, he seemed confident that I had been observing his movements.

[I learned a bit.]

After a brief moment of thought, I responded.

In truth, I learned quite a lot. The old man… Hwa Byeok-un, or Tan Hwajoo, was one of the top blacksmiths in the original story.

I observed his movements in detail using the Power of Observation, gathering valuable information.

Not only that, but I also collected data on the movements of most of the people working in the forge.

They were all members of the Gop-hwa Clan, proficient in advanced metallurgy.

If I were to mimic their techniques, I could probably practice some form of

metallurgy myself.

“You don’t seem to ask about me. Do you know who I am?”

[Yes.]

[You’re Tan Hwajoo Hwa Byeok-un.]

“Impressive. Even an old recluse with no external activities is known, it seems.”

An old recluse with no external activities?

That’s quite an understatement for the Gop-hwa Clan’s top blacksmith, who bears the title of Tan Hwajoo…

While I was searching for a response, Ariel, who had been following us quietly, spoke up.

“An old recluse with no external activities, you say? Then does that make me a brat who’s been stuck in a cradle?”

“It’s odd to see someone your age calling themselves a brat. How long has it been since you entered the Gop-hwa Clan—”

“What’s even odder is Tan Hwajoo-nim, who could still smash monsters with a hammer, calling himself an old recluse.”

Their sudden conversation left me quietly walking without interrupting.

I had been struggling to find an appropriate response, but thanks to Ariel, I was able to escape that predicament.

Continuing to walk, we eventually arrived at the mansion’s underground facility.

After passing through a long underground corridor, we reached a thick metal

wall. I observed the interior.

‘The primary material is Flamellus metal, resistant to high temperatures. The embedded technique is [Flame Resistance]… This must be the verification site.’

Not only the thick iron door, but the entire interior seemed to be designed to withstand flames.

The iron door creaked open, revealing three people already inside.

There was Hong Yeon-hwa, seemingly lost in deep thought, and Choi Jiyeon, looking exactly the same as she did in the morning.

And…

“Oh, you’ve arrived.”

A man with fiery red eyes locked his gaze onto me as I entered through the opened door. He then pointed at me with a broad smile.

“Sister-in-law, he’s here.”

“I’ve told you to call me the Head Mistress in official settings.”

“Eh? But isn’t it kind of stiff to call you that here, when it’s not even the conference room?”

“This is still technically an official… Never mind.”

Choi Jiyeon, who had started to say something, suddenly closed her eyes tightly, massaged the back of her neck, and fell silent.

The man chuckled at her response and walked over to me with a broad, friendly smile, extending a hand.

“Finally, I get to meet the man of the hour. I’m Hong Jin-hyuk.”

The man's actions and demeanor seemed quite easygoing.

In a positive light, he gave off an approachable and friendly vibe; in a negative light, one might say he didn't quite match the gravity of the situation.

Hong Jin-hyuk.

There may be others with the same name in this world, but when it comes to a member of the Gop-hwa Clan who addresses Choi Jiyeon as his sister-in-law, there's only one person it could be.

Jeong Hwajoo, Hong Jin-hyuk.

He's the younger brother of the clan head and the leader of the Gop-hwa Clan's combat unit, the Jeonghwadae.

[I'm Lee Hayul.]

[It's an honor to meet you.]

"Ah, so you're the polite and formal type."

We shook hands. As expected from someone with hands like pot lids, his grip was incredibly firm and solid.

Though superhuman bodies don't usually scar easily, his hands were covered in rough calluses.

I also observed him internally.

When I first encountered Hong Yeon-hwa, I sensed the dormant fire energy within her.

Even back then, when I wasn't fully aware of my Powers of Space and Observation and was using my spatial perception clumsily, I could feel it.

Now that I've grown, I could gather even clearer and more detailed information.

"Hmm… strange."

Just as I had gauged him, it seemed he had also been gauging me.

However, he appeared puzzled, as if he hadn't obtained any satisfactory information.

"I don't sense any Gop-hwa. Even if it's hidden deeply, to conceal it this… Ow!"

-Slap!

"Don't be rude, let's go."

Choi Jiyeon, who had slapped the back of Hong Jin-hyuk's head, sighed as she dusted off her hand.

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Somehow, I ended up standing alone in the center of the facility.

The verification process was simple.

The purpose of this meeting was to verify whether I could indeed use Gop-hwa.

In other words, there was no need for anything complicated; I just needed to manifest Gop-hwa once.

[Shall we begin?]

“Yes, please.”

At my question, Choi Jiyeon, who had been watching from behind a glass window, nodded.

Beyond the glass wall, in addition to Choi Jiyeon, Hong Yeon-hwa, Hwa Byeok-un, and Hong Jin-hyuk were also present.

Hong Jin-hyuk had insisted on staying nearby to personally experience the Gop-hwa, but… Choi Jiyeon had promptly dragged him away again.

Overall, it seemed like a casual atmosphere. Perhaps it was because they were all family.

‘Enough of these idle thoughts.’

For now, I dismissed any unnecessary thoughts.

I cleared away any lingering emotions and maintained a calm mind.

I must not forget. While Gop-hwa can burn anything, its favorite fuel is the emotions of its wielder.

Moreover, if there’s a lack of emotions to fuel it, Gop-hwa forcibly induces emotions to consume them, making it a particularly uncontrollable Unique Ability.

If you use it with a distracted mind and emotions that are thick and sticky, there’s a chance it could spiral out of control and consume you instead.

-Huuu…

I exhaled and calmed my mind, then began to circulate my mana.

Mana surged from my core, flowing through my circuits and concentrating on my right arm.

I arranged the mana. I expanded and amplified its uniqueness.

I wasn't creating something new, but rather, I was bringing forth and replicating something that already existed.

Mana Affinity Expansion Ability

Homogenization – Gop-hwa

Fwoosh! Intense flames erupted from my arm, which was wrapped in a sleeve.

* * *

A wave of crimson flames suddenly surged beyond the glass wall.

The wave of flames filled the interior of the facility, crashing incessantly against the glass wall.

Hwa Byeok-un reached out and touched the glass wall.

It was hot.

The heat of the flames… the heat of the Gop-hwa could be felt.

This glass wall was an insulated barrier that Hwa Byeok-un, Tan Hwajoo, had personally crafted.

It was designed and created to withstand ordinary Gop-hwa to some extent, but if exposed to that flame, it would soon melt away.

"Old man."

"Why, you tiger-tongued brat."

"Is it just my imagination?"

Hwa Byeok-un turned his head. The face of Hong Jin-hyuk, who had always

been lighthearted and never serious, was now filled with seriousness.

Surprised by this unexpected change, Hwa Byeok-un reflexively reached up to touch his own face.

He felt the same hardened muscles.

"……"

Is it just my imagination?

Hwa Byeok-un couldn't immediately respond.

He had felt the same sensation, but he couldn't come to a clear conclusion about it.

For 200 years, the Gop-hwa Clan had been passing down the Unique Ability known as Gop-hwa.

However, not everyone manifested Gop-hwa.

Moreover, not everyone who did manifested it in the same way.

While the fundamental intensity and ferocity of the manifested Gop-hwa remained consistent, there were variations depending on the individual manifesting it.

These differences were often subtle but distinguishable.

The Gop-hwa manifested by that boy gave off a sense of unease.

Hong Jin-hyuk, who had fought countless battles enveloped in Gop-hwa, and Hwa Byeok-un, who had spent decades forging metal in the face of flames, both felt a sense of unease from that Gop-hwa.

There was a distinct trait.

It was as intense as the Gop-hwa of Hong Yeon-hwa, whose power was

unprecedented in the history of the clan.

But also…

'That's… '

200 years.

A period short compared to human history, but more than enough time for traitors to emerge as the bloodline continued.

This special ability, passed down from the progenitor, was rare, but there had been instances where it wasn't used for the sake of humanity's peace.

And…

In relatively recent history, there was a manifestation of Gop-hwa that caused immense harm to civilians.

In the new city known as 'Yeokjin,' at the very center of the bustling downtown area, an incident occurred.

Thousands of civilians were burned to death on the spot, caught in the flames that spread in all directions.

When considering the indirect damage as well, the number of victims easily surpassed several times that number.

The person responsible for that catastrophe, who was immediately ordered to be eliminated by the Association as a 'must-terminate' threat, had a sticky trait in his Gop-hwa.

And some of that trait seemed to be mixed into this boy's Gop-hwa.

CHAPTER 135
THE BANQUET (1)

Flames erupted from my right arm, spreading in all directions.

The floor and walls turned red, and the surroundings quickly heated up.

The fire, which seemed poised to devour everything, flickered wildly.

And with each flicker, emotions were pulled along with it.

It was a vivid display of Gop-hwa.

I immediately began to control the flames.

I gently gathered the spreading fire, pulling it back in. The flames, which had expanded their form, slowly converged.

Since it was a part of mana manipulation, it wasn't difficult.

But this wasn't the end. Gop-hwa involved capturing emotions, not just controlling fire.

I restrained the emotions that were about to surge. If you suppress the emotional surge caused by Gop-hwa early on, it becomes relatively easier to manage afterward.

Once emotions swell, it's easy to get swept away by them.

That's why it's important to control and suppress emotions beforehand.

"Your control is flawless, and your emotional regulation is impressive… There's really nothing I need to teach you in this regard."

The location was the underground facility where the verification had taken place. Sitting comfortably in the center, I managed the Gop-hwa while casually observing the surroundings.

A little further away, Jeong Hwajoo, Hong Jin-hyuk, scratched his head as he looked at me with a troubled expression.

Several days had passed since the verification.

Although the purpose of my visit, the verification, was complete, there were still a few days left until the banquet, so I decided to stay as a guest during that time.

Over the past few days, I mainly focused on three activities.

Accompanying Hong Yeon-hwa as she introduced me to the various people and places within the clan's estate.

Watching Tan Hwajoo Hwa Byeok-un craft weapons.

And receiving lessons from Jeong Hwajoo Hong Jin-hyuk on how to use Gop-hwa…

At the moment, I was spending time learning about Gop-hwa from Hong Jin-hyuk.

During the verification.

Choi Jiyeon, who had seen the Gop-hwa I manifested with her own eyes, asked if she could have a few days to discuss the matter with a complicated expression.

Since there was no rush, I agreed.

There would be a lot to discuss.

An outsider manifesting the clan's Unique Ability.

Despite having heard this information from Shio-ram, witnessing it firsthand likely complicated things for them even further.

This was a significant issue.

It wasn't something that could be brushed off as an accidental manifestation.

After all, Gop-hwa was a Unique Ability that had only been manifested by the bloodline of the clan's progenitor.

This fact had always held true and served to unite the clan around their bloodline.

In such a situation, an outsider, with no blood relation, suddenly manifested Gop-hwa.

Of course, the truth is that it was merely a mimicry through my Unique Ability, but that's not something I can reveal.

To the outside world, I'm someone who manifested Gop-hwa without being part of the bloodline.

This has now set a precedent that Gop-hwa is not exclusively tied to the bloodline.

From the perspective of the Gop-hwa Clan, this is a very troubling situation.

'In the third cycle… '

In the third cycle, there were three.

Gop-hwa, Changhae, and Taesan.

I possessed all three Unique Abilities of the three great clans, albeit in a haphazard manner in that cycle.

The first Unique Ability revealed to the outside world was Taesan.

During an external mission, I found myself in a dire situation and used Taesan to get through it.

Unfortunately, that moment was witnessed by Lee Jiyeon, the successor of the Taesan Clan.

Just as I'm visiting the Gop-hwa Clan with Hong Yeon-hwa now, in the third cycle, I visited the Taesan Clan with Lee Jiyeon.

There was also a verification process, and many discussions followed.

The awkwardness of an outsider manifesting a clan's Unique Ability was also felt by the Taesan Clan in the third cycle.

As a result.

I was added to the Taesan Clan's genealogy in the third cycle.

In short, they fabricated the family records to include me as a blood relative.

It was a shallow trick, just covering the truth with a lie… but what else could they do?

While it's problematic for an outsider to manifest a clan's Unique Ability, it's not an issue if a clan member manifests it.

Is it not true that I'm from the bloodline? You just need to come up with a reason.

You can fabricate a story about how a descendant from a previously estranged branch of the family appeared and manifested the Unique Ability through some kind of atavism, and who would argue with that?

The important thing is the justification: 'This person is actually part of our bloodline.'

That's how I was listed in the Taesan Clan's genealogy in the third cycle.

Later, when my Gop-hwa and Changhae were exposed, the surrounding relationships turned chaotic… but anyway.

‘Will it go that way again this time?’

Adding me to the family records wouldn’t be too difficult. Besides, it’s the simplest solution.

“Hmm…”

As I was lost in thought, a quiet hum from the front brought me back.

When I adjusted my posture, Hong Jin-hyuk, who had been stroking his chin in contemplation, finally spoke up.

“Do you know that there aren’t many techniques passed down within the clan for Gop-hwa?”

[I’ve heard about it.]

Unique Abilities that are inherited within bloodlines, like those of the three great clans, or those that are similar in nature, often develop their own unique techniques.

These techniques may go beyond the Unique Ability itself, becoming Expansion Abilities, or they may not reach that level but still be highly practical.

A prime example is the techniques demonstrated by Baek Ahrin during the tournament finals, ‘Whirlpool Water Palm’ and ‘Water Mirror Spheres.’

Whirlpool Water Palm is a technique designed to utilize the water element of Changhae in combat, while Water Mirror Spheres is a foundational technique for the full utilization of Changhae’s abilities.

They are excellent techniques, but they are not Expansion Abilities.

Thanks to this, it's possible to use them even without Changhae by simply utilizing the water element itself. Of course, using them with Changhae would greatly amplify their power.

In any case, there aren't many such techniques for Gop-hwa.

"Gop-hwa is a rather troublesome ability."

Hong Jin-hyuk, one of the foremost experts in utilizing Gop-hwa in this generation, referred to it as a 'troublesome' ability.

"Fine control is difficult, and elevating it to a technique is even harder. Even if you create a technique, passing it down as knowledge and having the next generation learn it is not that common."

There are some techniques that utilize Gop-hwa, but compared to other clans, the difficulty of mastering them is significantly higher.

In other words, the barrier to entry is high, so not many people have mastered it.

When you consider that Whirlpool Water Palm was created to enhance the martial prowess of a bloodline specialized in a non-combat element like water, it becomes clear that the Gop-hwa Clan lacks such foundational techniques.

"But Gop-hwa is simply powerful."

Because Gop-hwa is a Unique Ability that can be sufficiently utilized even without such foundational techniques.

With the extraordinary output of Gop-hwa, simply dousing your opponent with it is more than enough to achieve overwhelming lethality.

After all, it's an ability specialized for combat, so there's no need to weave it into complex techniques.

As a result, what Hong Jin-hyuk taught me wasn't any complicated technique but rather the finer points of controlling Gop-hwa.

"It's going to be very difficult. So listen carefully and make sure to practice and refine it during your personal training."

Of course, most people struggle with this fine control.

That's why Hong Jin-hyuk emphasized the difficulty beforehand and urged me to follow carefully.

"…Well."

-Fwoosh…

Hong Jin-hyuk looked at the flames with a somewhat awkward expression.

The flames flickered at his fingertips, constantly changing shape.

Circles, triangles, squares, pentagons, and other geometric shapes.

Shapes of weapons like swords, bows and arrows, spears, and axes.

The flames, which rose thin and long, swayed left and right like waves before contracting into a small sphere.

The fire continued to take on various forms, alternating between breaking apart and reforming. It ranged from simple basic manipulations to those requiring meticulous control.

Over the past few days, I had internalized a lot of know-how on fine control.

I had already learned the basics directly from Hong Yeon-hwa, and Hong Jin-hyuk had put considerable effort into teaching me.

Of course, achieving the proficiency needed for combat would require further practice. I'll need to train even more for that.

“It’s unbelievable. It took me several months of focused effort to succeed in something like that.”

‘……’

“And the young lady too. Lately, I’ve been feeling like I’m becoming obsolete…”

I thought for a moment about Hong Jin-hyuk’s grumbling, but I couldn’t find the right words to respond.

The Necklace of Confession chose to remain silent as well.

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Time continued to pass, and eventually, the day of the Gop-hwa Clan’s regular banquet arrived.

I couldn’t help but be aware of it, given how bustling the surrounding estate had been over the past few days.

Even now, I could observe the continuous line of vehicles arriving in real-time.

The people in the vehicles had hair and eye colors in shades of red. Additionally, though there were differences, the mana within them carried a fiery attribute.

They appeared to be members of the Gop-hwa Clan’s branch families or affiliated factions summoned for the regular banquet.

The building presumed to be the banquet hall was also bustling with activity.

Watching the servants hurriedly moving in and out, I got the sense that the banquet was about to start.

It seemed like a large-scale event. Well, it is a banquet hosted by the Gop-hwa Clan. They must be preparing it grandly to match the occasion.

The thought of participating in such a large banquet made me feel a bit of pressure… but there was no way to escape it.

In the end, there was no other choice but to participate quietly.

-Knock, knock.

“Young Master, it’s Ariel.”

[Yes.]

[You may come in.]

Creak— The door opened, and Ariel, now quite accustomed to wearing her modern maid uniform, entered.

[Sorry to trouble you.]

“It’s no trouble at all. After all, this is part of my job, and given that you’re staying in the room next to the young lady, it’s not an inconvenience in the slightest.”

Ariel shook her head, indicating that I shouldn’t think of it that way, while holding a rectangular box in her hands.

After bowing my head in gratitude, I pointed to the box she was holding.

[What is that?]

“These are the clothes you’ll be wearing, Young Master.”

At my question, Ariel opened the box on the table.

Inside the box was a set of clothing.

I observed the clothes.

The color scheme was in shades of red. It seemed that the Gop-hwa Clan had intentionally designed it to evoke the imagery of intense flames.

As for the style… what should I call it? Flowing robes… or maybe traditional martial attire?

The length was generally long, and the width was broad. The decorations weren't overly emphasized. It seemed to prioritize elegance over flamboyance.

[It's a beautiful outfit.]

"Yes, it's a traditional attire of the Gop-hwa Clan… specially made for a very distinguished guest."

[Is that so…?]

At my comment, Ariel nodded with her characteristic expressionless face.

For some reason, she emphasized the words 'very distinguished.'

* * *

[The Unique Ability [Jack of All Trades] is growing.]

[The Unique Ability [Mana Affinity] is growing.]

[The Uniq?e Abilit? [???] is growing.]

CHAPTER 136
THE BANQUET (2)

In a secluded corner of the main estate, there is a building called Yeonhwa Hall.

It is a facility used for large gatherings, generally hosting the clan's annual banquet, which may or may not happen once a year.

Normally, Yeonhwa Hall sees very little foot traffic.

As a facility intended for banquets, it isn't used daily, so people rarely visit it except for basic maintenance by the attendants, and the security personnel.

However, today, the hall was filled with bustling activity.

Hong Yeon-hwa looked up.

The orange light from the luminous stones embedded in the lanterns hanging from the ceiling illuminated the surroundings.

She blinked once and lowered her head.

The warm-toned floor and walls absorbed the orange light, giving off a gentle glow.

The decorations placed and engraved in various locations harmonized with the light, contributing to an overall warm atmosphere.

Even to Hong Yeon-hwa, who lacked an artistic eye, the interior design clearly showed the effort put into it.

Unlike usual, under the brightly lit lanterns, the hall was filled with people dressed to the nines.

It wasn't so crowded that there was no room to move, but no matter where she turned her head, there was always at least one or two people within her line of sight.

The common feature among them was the predominance of red hues in their hair and eye colors.

They were important guests, either branch members of the Gop-hwa Clan or related factions.

It was a familiar sight to Hong Yeon-hwa. She had been chosen as the successor after manifesting Gop-hwa at a very young age.

Since then, Hong Yeon-hwa had participated in the annual banquet every year as the clan's successor alongside her father, the clan head.

"Sigh…"

Though it was a familiar sight, it wasn't one she particularly enjoyed.

Hong Yeon-hwa liked the banquet itself.

Meeting and playing with close friends, eating delicious food, and enjoying cool and sweet drinks were all things she liked.

But she didn't enjoy the complex web of interests, where every conversation required careful maneuvering of her words.

Hong Yeon-hwa sighed deeply and rubbed the back of her neck, her eyes half-closed as she looked down at her attire.

She wore a bright red, undecorated martial robe with a jet-black belt wrapped around her waist.

Over the simple martial robe, a garment adorned with intricate patterns draped over her, contrasting with the simplicity of the robe.

This was the clan's traditional attire, specifically the ceremonial robe worn by the successor, known as Hwawanpo.

The robe was made of two main materials.

The fur and hide of a rank 5 monster called the Fire Rat and the leaves of the Inextinguishable Tree, where the Fire Rat resides.

The Fire Rat wasn't particularly powerful, but its fur and hide had excellent mana compatibility, making the materials highly valuable due to their scarcity.

The Inextinguishable Tree, where the Fire Rat resides, was also a rare material.

Hwawanpo was a luxurious item crafted from these and dozens more ingredients.

Hong Yeon-hwa absentmindedly fiddled with her sleeve.

The texture wasn't bad. It wasn't rough or stiff and had a soft, clingy feel.

The robe's defense wasn't bad either. Given the materials used and the fact that it was personally crafted by Tan Hwajoo Hwa Byeok-un, it could easily mock any ordinary armor.

But it was still more uncomfortable than her usual clothes.

Hong Yeon-hwa kept rubbing her sleeve while shaking her head.

'It's uncomfortable.'

She wanted to change into something more comfortable.

"No."

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, she was promptly stopped by Choi

Jiyeon standing beside her.

“Especially not this time.”

“I know. You don’t need to tell me.”

Hong Yeon-hwa pouted slightly and turned her head.

Nevertheless, she straightened her posture.

Even more than before, it was vital for Hong Yeon-hwa to maintain her presence at this year’s banquet.

Traditionally, leading the clan’s banquet was the role of the clan head.

While the Clan’s General might assist, it was customary for the clan head to be the one in charge.

The current clan head was in the African Demonic Realm.

He had crossed the front lines with his battle division earlier this year to investigate the cause of the abnormal phenomena occurring there.

That was the story at the beginning of the year. The clan head had not returned since.

Although periodic updates were received, the clan head couldn’t attend this year’s banquet.

Therefore, the responsibility of leading this year’s banquet naturally fell to Choi Jiyeon, acting as the clan head’s proxy, and Hong Yeon-hwa, the successor.

“Huh.”

Lost in her thoughts, Hong Yeon-hwa suddenly let out a small exclamation.

She turned her gaze ahead.

In the center of the spacious Yeonhwa Hall.

On a small platform, a sword was embedded upside down.

Its appearance wasn't what one would expect from a typical sword.

The blade was transparent, so clear that its insides were visible as if it were made of glass. It looked so fragile that it seemed it would shatter with a single tap.

But everyone present knew.

That was not a weak sword.

In fact, they knew that no matter how hard anyone swung at it with all their might, it would be nearly impossible to leave even a small mark on this indestructible sword.

The Fenghuo Sword.

It was the weapon used by the progenitor, Hong Yeon, and the method of its creation had been passed down through the generations.

While called a weapon, its rank made it almost indistinguishable from an artifact.

In the present era, there were two Fenghuo Swords.

One was the progenitor's sword, embedded in the platform, and the other was owned by the current clan head.

Each Fenghuo Sword was crafted by the Tan Hwajoo of that generation and bestowed upon the clan head.

Hong Yeon-hwa's Fenghuo Sword had not yet been made.

It would be made eventually. It was only expected that the illustrious Tan

Hwajoo, Hwa Byeok-un, would be the one to make it.

“So, I’m supposed to draw the Fenghuo Sword?”

“Of course, you have to draw it…”

At the end of the banquet, it was customary for the clan head to ascend the platform and infuse the Fenghuo Sword with Gop-hwa, marking the conclusion of the event.

Since the clan head was absent, this role naturally fell to Hong Yeon-hwa.

How troublesome.

Suppressing the urge to frown, Hong Yeon-hwa greeted the approaching guests along with Choi Jiyeon.

There were many reasons for holding the banquet.

It served as an opportunity for the scattered bloodlines of Gop-hwa to gather and share information, for those who had grown distant to reconnect, and for those who were close to strengthen their relationships even further.

It was also a day to demonstrate the vitality of the main clan, which stood at the center of Gop-hwa, and to identify any upstarts who might try to overstep.

As much as Hong Yeon-hwa might be a filial daughter, she wasn’t so unruly as to impose an even greater burden on Choi Jiyeon, who had to lead the banquet without the clan head.

Though Choi Jiyeon had scolded her, she felt relieved to see Hong Yeon-hwa maintaining her stance and acting accordingly.

As time passed and they found a brief moment of respite.

Choi Jiyeon slyly asked,

“Have you spoken to him?”

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been straightening her back, flinched. There was no need for further explanation; she understood right away.

“…I’m planning to tell him today.”

Her lips opened hesitantly, revealing her nervousness and anxiety.

“Sigh.”

Choi Jiyeon let out a sigh, her expression one of exasperation.

Her daughter was strangely timid when it came to certain things.

“Even though we’ve already agreed on the story, we decided to include Hayul as the descendant of someone who was disowned about a hundred years ago.”

“I know… Hayul?”

As Hong Yeon-hwa nodded, she suddenly froze.

Now it was Hong Yeon-hwa’s turn to look puzzled.

She looked back, doubting her own ears, and Choi Jiyeon shrugged.

“Hayul asked to be addressed comfortably, so I adjusted the titles. Why?”

“Oh… It’s just strange to hear you call him that so casually, Mom.”

“What’s so strange about it? I’m still just a person.”

Choi Jiyeon shook her head as if it were a silly thing to say.

Over the past few days, she had conversed with Lee Hayul, who had been staying at the main estate.

It wouldn't have been right to include him in the family records without saying anything.

During that process, Choi Jiyeon had gotten to know Lee Hayul's personality a bit more and even grown somewhat close to him.

Lee Hayul hadn't just grown close to Choi Jiyeon.

He had been quite active over the past few days.

– I appreciated his willingness to try things on his own before asking for help.

He would head to the workshop early in the morning, learning smithing skills from Tan Hwajoo Hwa Byeok-un and others, and building camaraderie through conversations.

– He learns so quickly that he's already caught up with me. I've sparred with him three times, and I couldn't even graze him.

He also familiarized himself with the combatants while receiving guidance from Jeong Hwajoo Hong Jin-hyuk, building rapport through friendly sparring matches.

– You can tell he's genuinely a good person just by how he carries himself.

He was courteous and polite to the attendants he encountered while moving around, quickly gaining their favor.

– He's polite and well-mannered, unlike most young people these days.

Moreover, even the elders he met a few times to discuss the family records seemed to think highly of Lee Hayul…

'……'

As Choi Jiyeon thought about this, she made a curious expression.

It was almost as if Lee Hayul had been trying to build goodwill all around.

Blacksmiths, combatants, attendants, elders…

Although Choi Jiyeon understood that Lee Hayul wasn't that kind of person, his actions certainly gave that impression.

-Click.

Just then.

The doors that had been closed opened, and a figure entered.

Everyone, whether they were deep in conversation, looking for a place to rest, or snacking to stave off hunger, turned their attention in one direction.

Hong Yeon-hwa did as well.

She was aware that there would be a guest at this year's banquet, and she knew who that guest was.

So it wasn't difficult to guess who was entering through the door now.

Her heart pounded.

Feeling the thudding of her heart filled with anticipation, she turned her head.

"……"

She saw red.

The attire was similar.

Hwawanpo made from the fur of the Fire Rat and the leaves of the Inextinguishable Tree. It fluttered slightly more than her own.

The elegant appearance of Hwawanpo was tied with a black belt, and over it,

a splendid outer garment was draped.

Despite the appropriate size, the figure's small stature gave off a delicate and adorable ambiance.

Although the elegance of Hwawanpo and the splendor of the outer garment contrasted, they shared a common red hue.

Thanks to that, the milky white skin stood out even more.

Especially the fine, delicate features were emphasized, drawing everyone's gaze.

The closed eyelids and long eyelashes exuded an aura of refined elegance, and the moist lips tightly sealed, inexplicably sparked a desire for a challenge within Hong Yeon-hwa.

Just moments ago, the surrounding area had been filled with the murmur of conversation, but it now fell into silence.

Even the musicians who had been playing their instruments stopped.

No one spoke. It was as if everyone's gaze had been forcibly drawn, much like a hand gripping the back of one's neck.

"…?"

Perhaps puzzled by this.

Lee Hayul tilted his head slightly.

That adorable gesture was perfectly captured in Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes.

"……"

Hong Yeon-hwa found herself gaping in a daze.

-Fwoosh…

The desire she had been suppressing surged.

* * *

[The Unique Ability [Jack of All Trades] is growing.]

CHAPTER 137
THE BANQUET (3)

The clothing itself wasn't difficult to put on.

Though the fabric was wide and billowed out, it was easy enough to just slip it on and fasten the belt around the waist.

The material was so comfortable that it could easily be worn as everyday attire.

As for the relatively elaborate overgarment, it simply needed to be draped over the shoulders and secured.

It was a simple process. With the Power of Observation, I could easily figure out how to wear it.

It might have been cumbersome to do with just one arm, but with the Wings of the Sky, it was manageable.

"I will assist with your makeup."

[Yes.]

[Please do… Wait, makeup?]

The problem was the steps before that.

Just as I was about to put on the clothes, I was suddenly shoved into a bath.

And I had to soak for quite a while in water that steamed with heat, as if I were being boiled alive.

When I finally managed to drag my warmed-up body out of the bath, they

smeared various cosmetics and fragrant oils not only on my skin but also on my hair.

After that.

A swarm of attendants rushed in, sat me down in front of a vanity, and started fussing over my hair—drying it, styling it, and whatnot…

It was only after enduring that long and tedious process that I finally got to put on the clothes.

By that point, all my energy had been drained.

The preparations were too thorough.

I was completely worn out before I even set foot in the banquet hall.

But having been dressed up like this, there was no way I could just run away.

Moreover, Choi Jiyeon planned to announce my induction into the family registry towards the end of the banquet.

After that announcement, we had agreed that I would display Gop-hwa before the gathered audience.

It would be absurd for the main participant to be absent during the event.

So, I followed Ariel as she led me to the venue for the annual banquet.

I trudged along, and soon, the large doors swung open.

'Hmm… '

And I was met with a rather peculiar reaction.

The responses of those inside, as observed through the Power of Observation, were unusual.

I expected to draw some attention.

I later learned that it was rare for the Gop-hwa Clan to invite guests… or outsiders to their annual banquet.

So, I figured I would attract a fair amount of interest upon my entrance.

"……"

"……"

"……"

But the level of attention was far beyond what I had anticipated.

The conversations that had been taking place just moments ago had come to an abrupt halt.

Everyone there, as if they had encountered something unimaginable, was staring blankly in my direction… at me.

The room was so silent that you could likely hear an ant crawling. Even the music had stopped at some point.

This was not a normal reaction, no matter how I looked at it.

Was I not supposed to enter yet?

I turned to Ariel, who had followed behind me, and asked.

[Did I come in at the wrong time?]

"No, Young Master. This is the correct time for your entrance."

Then why is everyone reacting like this? They look as if they've witnessed something astonishing.

Perhaps my confusion showed on my face because Ariel, with her usual

expressionless demeanor, spoke up.

“Everyone is simply stunned by your beauty, Young Master.”

“?”

The response that came from her expressionless face was utterly bewildering. I couldn’t help but make a perplexed expression in return.

Her face was so stoic that I couldn’t tell if she was joking or being serious.

She must be joking.

[Beau…]

[Should I say thank you…?]

I nodded, attempting to smooth over my awkward expression.

“Ahem.”

At that moment.

A cough echoed through the silence that had settled over the banquet hall.

It was Choi Jiyeon, who had been staring at me wide-eyed like the others.

As if on cue, the people who had been frozen began to move again.

Their movements were somewhat awkward and stiff, but it seemed the banquet was resuming.

– ♪~

The musicians, who had been standing still awkwardly, suddenly snapped out of it and quickly resumed playing their instruments.

The music pushed away the silence.

Conscious of the sounds filling my ears, I glanced around.

Though the gazes were still piercing into me, it seemed the banquet was indeed continuing.

Only after confirming that people were moving again did I make my way towards Choi Jiyeon and Hong Yeon-hwa.

Tan Hwajoo Hwa Byeok-un and Jeong Hwajoo Hong Jin-hyuk were not beside them.

They were within my range of observation.

Hwa Byeok-un was seated at a table in a corner of the banquet hall, continuously drinking what appeared to be makgeolli.

Hong Jin-hyuk wasn't in the banquet hall at all. He was waiting in the main estate, fully armed.

I didn't find it strange.

Hong Jin-hyuk had stayed behind at the main estate instead of joining the exploration team in the Demonic Realm to deal with any potential attacks.

He had grumbled about this to me during our training sessions, expressing regret over not being included in the expedition.

I walked over to Choi Jiyeon and Hong Yeon-hwa.

"You look absolutely stunning."

Choi Jiyeon covered her mouth with her hand, speaking in a tone of pleasant surprise.

"Even more so than I imagined. How can it suit you so well?"

[Thank you.]

That was a proper compliment.

Unlike Ariel's earlier comment, this was a normal and appropriate compliment, and I bowed my head in gratitude.

Then I lifted my head and turned to Hong Yeon-hwa.

Hong Yeon-hwa was dressed similarly to me.

She wore the elegant attire with a black belt, and a splendid outer garment draped over her shoulders.

If not for the fact that my clothing billowed a bit more, we could have been mistaken for wearing the exact same outfit.

"……"

But Hong Yeon-hwa had been strangely silent since earlier.

She just stood there, her mouth opening and closing, swallowing nervously, and then shaking her head in surprise…

Her face flushed red, her pupils unfocused, as if she were in some sort of trance.

Wondering if she was feeling unwell, I quickly used the Power of Observation on her, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

There weren't any particular injuries.

The Gop-hwa within her was swirling around in a somewhat sticky manner, but that was something that happened frequently, so I didn't pay it any mind.

[How do I look? Do I look okay?]

I asked cautiously, keeping an eye on Hong Yeon-hwa's expression.

When I lifted my hand, the wide, billowing sleeve felt like it was sliding down

like a curtain.

The outfit was elegant and flowing, secured with a black belt.

Over my shoulders, a splendid overgarment was draped and fastened, almost like a cape.

Thanks to the outer garment, my empty left arm wasn't exposed. My right arm was covered as usual with a sleeve that concealed my burnt scars.

The overall color scheme was red, but since my hair was black, it seemed to clash a bit.

In contrast, Hong Yeon-hwa's outfit, with her beautiful red hair and eyes, suited her perfectly.

Although I asked for her opinion, from my subjective point of view, I didn't think my outfit suited me all that well.

Despite that, I still sought her evaluation.

Underlying that was a somewhat shameless desire to receive a compliment, even if I personally found it strange.

"Uh, um…"

In response to my question, which was tinged with both concern and subtle anticipation, Hong Yeon-hwa stumbled over her words, avoiding my gaze as if the sight of me was too much.

"You're… too beautiful…"

"……"

It was a compliment.

Beautiful.

A word that means something is visually pleasing, lovely, or even adorable or charming…

It was a compliment that made me feel good.

And yet, I couldn't help but feel something strange.

Shamelessly, I had sought a compliment and received one, but still.

In truth, and more shamelessly, I had hoped for a different kind of compliment.

The outfit I wore gave off a vibe that leaned towards a martial robe.

Not the robe of a shaman or fortune-teller, but the kind of martial robe one might wear for training or combat.

[Thank you.]

[But, um… any other thoughts?]

"More…?"

In other words, I had hoped to hear that I looked cool, or that I looked dignified, or even that I looked striking.

Hiding my faint hope, I asked again.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who seemed to be struggling to come up with another compliment, hesitated before speaking.

"You're… cute…"

A more peculiar compliment than before.

[…You look very beautiful too, Hong Yeon-hwa.]

[It really suits you.]

Still, a compliment is a compliment.

I hid my awkward expression as I replied, and Hong Yeon-hwa's flushed face brightened instantly.

"……"

For some reason, Choi Jiyeon was watching us with an expression that suggested she didn't know what to do with us.

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Though I was invited to the banquet as a guest, I didn't really have anything specific to do.

After all, the annual banquet itself wasn't anything particularly special.

It was a time for those who had been apart to reunite, share news, and exchange views on future actions and world affairs.

Meanwhile, the main family would meet the branch members and subordinates, getting acquainted and conducting a sort of ideological screening.

In essence, they would talk to one person after another, checking if they held any questionable beliefs, and indirectly warning that if they stepped out of line, they would be dealt with.

Because of this, Choi Jiyeon and Hong Yeon-hwa were busy greeting those who came to pay their respects.

There were at least several hundred guests at the banquet. If each of them came to visit one by one, that would mean several hundred conversations to

be had.

Basically, they spent the entire banquet greeting visitors.

“It’s been a while since we last met, Clan Leader Yeolpoong. I heard you successfully conquered the satellite dungeon, congratulations.”

“Thanks to the support sent from the main family, I was able to finish it splendidly, thanks to the General’s consideration.”

“Did you make good use of the gift I sent?”

“Thanks to that gift, I was able to prevent casualties that might have occurred near the end. I extend my gratitude here and now.”

The burden of leading such conversations mostly fell on the General.

Choi Jiyeon led the conversations with a flawless smile.

There was nothing strange about that. After all, the role of the General was to handle such matters.

Even if the clan head had been present, the General would have been the one to lead the conversation.

As a result, Hong Yeon-hwa didn’t speak much.

She only responded to questions directed at her or occasionally initiated questions herself.

And I was standing right beside them, listening to those conversations.

This wasn’t unusual either.

The plan was to announce the “secret” of my birth (or lack thereof) during the banquet.

Thus, I needed to stay by Choi Jiyeon and Hong Yeon-hwa’s side and make my

face known beforehand.

"……"

I stood quietly, taking in the conversations around me.

Except for the occasional question directed at me, I remained silent.

It wouldn't be long before the banquet ended.

I had arrived midway through the banquet, and it wasn't an event that lasted very long to begin with.

Soon, Hong Yeon-hwa would draw the Fenghuo Sword, perform the ritual, and announce my induction into the family registry, bringing the event to a close.

'Whew… '

From that moment on, I would be free to use Gop-hwa more liberally as Lee Hayul.

Though it was an encouraging thought, unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to use it freely at the place I planned to visit during this vacation.

After all, I wouldn't be using the identity of Lee Hayul there.

'I hope this time I don't come back empty-handed.'

As I was mulling over these thoughts.

-Swish…

"……!"

Suddenly, I felt something wrap around my shoulder, causing me to flinch.

My instincts didn't kick in, and I didn't feel any resistance to the touch. It was

a familiar hand gesture, so I didn't counterattack.

Moreover, I knew whose hand it was, thanks to the Power of Observation.

The hand belonged to Hong Yeon-hwa.

She had been occasionally joining the conversations, but she suddenly reached out and wrapped her arm around my shoulder.

[?]

It looked like she was trying to put her arm around my shoulder.

When I tilted my head in confusion, the arm around my shoulder gently pulled me closer.

-Poof.

The slight distance between us closed.

Before I could react, a soft sensation enveloped me.

The particularly soft sensation cradled my head.

Suddenly, in a place full of people, not in a private setting, the unexpected contact made my face heat up.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Hong Yeon-hwa

●●●●●●●●○○ (86▷87/100)

[?] [?] [Gratitude] [Warmth] [Comfort]

…

[The conditions to lift the “Curse of Silence” have not been met.]

[The conditions to lift the “Curse of Loneliness” have not been met.]

CHAPTER 138
FENGHUO SWORD

This was bewildering, to say the least.

The suddenness of the action caught me off guard.

During the banquet, which had been proceeding normally, Hong Yeon-hwa quietly approached me.

I didn't think much of it. I had grown accustomed to Hong Yeon-hwa suddenly drawing near.

Then, Hong Yeon-hwa extended her arm, draped it over my shoulder, and pulled me into her embrace.

For a moment, I couldn't comprehend what was happening.

[Warmth]

[Softness]

[Gentleness]

But the soft, comforting sensation that pressed against me, along with the warmth that slowly spread through me, brought me back to reality.

To be honest, this kind of behavior wasn't anything new.

As embarrassing as it may be, I've often ended up in Hong Yeon-hwa's embrace.

There were many times when I would collapse onto the floor, exhausted, only to be picked up by Hong Yeon-hwa.

Being held in her arms, petted, and comforted… it was more common than one might think.

[Hong Yeon-hwa?]

“Yes. Why?”

[There are a lot of eyes on us…]

However, those instances had always been in private, with just the two of us.

In places where there were no witnesses, where no strange rumors could arise.

This time was different.

Aware of the heat rising to my face, I used the Power of Observation to scan the surroundings.

At least hundreds of eyes were fixed on us. It had been that way since I entered the banquet hall.

These were the branch families and subordinates of the Gop-hwa Clan… people powerful enough to be invited to the annual banquet.

In other words, they were individuals capable of spreading any interesting gossip in an instant.

Cautiously, I called out to Hong Yeon-hwa, but she responded as if nothing was wrong, asking if there was something bothering me.

Her reaction, seemingly indifferent to both her actions and the stares around us, left me momentarily bewildered.

I shrugged my shoulder slightly, causing her arm draped over it to shift as well.

As I conveyed my message with more explicit body language, Hong Yeon-hwa seemed to ponder for a moment before subtly moving her hand.

-Swish…

'Hic.'

[Tickle]

The touch as her hand stroked my shoulder made me shiver.

It was a gentle yet ticklish touch.

As my body flinched in response, Hong Yeon-hwa pulled me even closer, as if pleased with the result.

The gazes around us grew even more peculiar.

Did Hong Yeon-hwa sense this? Even though her face turned red, she didn't loosen her grip around my shoulder.

It was around that time that I realized Hong Yeon-hwa was fully aware of the stares but was still acting this way intentionally.

It was puzzling.

Until now, Hong Yeon-hwa had often pulled me into her embrace, but she had always been conscious of others' gazes.

At Shio-ram, even when others were around, she would limit any physical contact to things like patting my head or gently pinching my cheeks.

She had never acted so openly before.

The rush of heat to my head made me feel dizzy.

And that wasn't all. Given that this was a banquet, there was food and drink… including alcohol.

This was the Gop-hwa Clan's main house banquet. There was no lack of preparation, and the alcohol provided seemed to be expensive, high-quality stuff.

Perhaps because I was surrounded by such drinks, my mood wasn't the best.

Just like after the afterparty at the Tower of Growth, my mind became hazy and dazed, as if shrouded in fog.

With my face already flushed from the heat, my head grew even more disoriented.

"It's alright."

Suddenly, Hong Yeon-hwa patted my shoulder and spoke.

Her gesture made me blink.

It's alright…

No reason or explanation followed as to why it was okay.

With all the eyes on us.

Even as she pulled me into her embrace and moved about, fully aware that rumors would spread, she simply stated that it was alright.

'Alright… '

But if Hong Yeon-hwa said it was alright.

That alone was enough to calm my heart, which had been pounding in my chest.

There was trust, a belief of sorts.

Hong Yeon-hwa wouldn't intentionally do something that would harm me.

If she was acting this way despite being aware of the stares, there had to be a reason.

I stopped shrugging my shoulder.

Entrusting myself to Hong Yeon-hwa's touch, I leaned into her embrace.

Hong Yeon-hwa continued to greet the guests as they approached.

It was the same as before.

Choi Jiyeon led the conversation, and the guests responded. Hong Yeon-hwa occasionally replied when she was directly addressed.

Then, whenever the guest's gaze shifted to me, Hong Yeon-hwa would glance at me as if to reassure me, gently stroking and patting my shoulder.

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Time passed like that, and finally, the time for the annual banquet to end arrived.

Choi Jiyeon and Hong Yeon-hwa had exchanged greetings with everyone who participated in the banquet.

The guests had also had ample time to converse among themselves.

"It seems we're all feeling a bit tired. Talking nonstop for several hours isn't an easy task, after all."

Choi Jiyeon caught everyone's attention as she spoke. At the mention of the banquet's conclusion, all eyes turned towards her in silence.

What followed was a customary closing remark.

Thank you for gracing us with your presence today. We will continue to meet regularly in the future. We hope you'll once again honor us with your presence. Let's continue to get along well, etc…

Perhaps due to the Gop-hwa Clan's preference for straightforwardness, such formalities were quickly wrapped up.

"Given that the clan head is currently absent, the closing of the banquet will be handled by the heir, Hong Yeon-hwa."

"Wait here for a moment."

With those words, Hong Yeon-hwa gently slipped away from my side.

She then confidently ascended the central platform without any hesitation.

The closing ceremony of the annual banquet involves the clan head pouring Gop-hwa into the Fenghuo Sword.

Since the clan head was absent today, the responsibility fell to the heir, Hong Yeon-hwa.

On the platform, a single sword was embedded in the ground, pointing downward. Its blade looked as if it were made of transparent glass.

Judging by its appearance alone, it seemed like it would shatter into pieces with just a single kick.

But with my knowledge of the original work and the real-time information from the Power of Observation, I knew that would never happen.

'Fenghuo Sword.'

The unique weapon wielded by the head of the Gop-hwa Clan.

It exists solely to contain, harmonize, and amplify the fierce and violent Gop-hwa.

I vividly remembered Hong Yeon-hwa wielding the Fenghuo Sword in the original work.

While part of the reason was the increase in Hong Yeon-hwa's power while wielding the sword… another reason was that I had some idea of the cost that went into making it.

The main material for the sword was a magic crystal from a third-tier or higher monster that emitted fire energy.

In addition, it was adorned with various gems of the highest purity, imbued with vast amounts of magic power…

Gems of such high purity are rare and difficult to obtain, even with money.

And the magic crystal from a third-tier or higher monster… it's not something that can be easily valued with money.

Such magic crystals are classified as strategic assets. I remember that just one of those could easily power several magic power plants.

In short, wielding that sword was akin to swinging something that cost more than a castle.

Hong Yeon-hwa didn't hesitate as she drew the Fenghuo Sword.

-Swish…

The Fenghuo Sword, embedded in the platform, was pulled out without resistance.

The Fenghuo Sword doesn't select its wielder. It's not astronomically heavy, so even an ordinary person could lift it.

Hong Yeon-hwa gripped the handle with both hands and raised the sword, pointing the tip towards the sky.

The transparent blade momentarily reflected the orange glow of the lanterns, tinting it.

-Whoosh!

The blade ignited with red flames.

The Gop-hwa that burst from Hong Yeon-hwa's grip roared fiercely, swirling around before pouring into the transparent blade.

As if in response, more Gop-hwa surged out from Hong Yeon-hwa.

The surroundings grew hot.

As the intensity of the Gop-hwa became palpable, a few people couldn't help but gasp in awe.

'Oh… '

I was also inwardly impressed.

The Gop-hwa that Hong Yeon-hwa wielded now was on an entirely different level compared to what I had felt at the beginning of the semester. The output had crossed a threshold.

It seems that overcoming the trials in the Tower of Growth and conquering a stage of Gop-hwa had paid off.

-Whoosh…

Suddenly, a wind arose. Sparks flew, carried by the wind that swirled around Hong Yeon-hwa.

The overgarment draped over Hong Yeon-hwa's shoulders billowed in the wind. Even the sparks that danced in the wind were drawn into the blade.

The Fenghuo Sword continued to devour the Gop-hwa insatiably.

The once transparent blade turned a deep crimson as it greedily absorbed the Gop-hwa.

However.

-Whoosh…

Even Hong Yeon-hwa's Gop-hwa didn't flow endlessly.

At a certain point, Hong Yeon-hwa let out a deep breath and stopped the outflow of Gop-hwa.

The stream of Gop-hwa, which had been surging towards the ceiling, wavered and swiftly vanished.

The Fenghuo Sword greedily sucked in the last trace of Gop-hwa.

-Whoom…

The blade, now glowing red-hot, vibrated momentarily as if resonating, then gradually returned to its original transparent, glass-like appearance.

The Fenghuo Sword, once wielded by the founder Hong Yeon, had never found a new master.

While the exact mechanism was unclear, I could only speculate that it was because the sword had already been tainted by the Gop-hwa of the founder, Hong Yeon.

As a result, the Fenghuo Sword is now used as a ceremonial sword for various events within the Gop-hwa Clan.

"Whew…"

Hong Yeon-hwa, having stopped the outflow of Gop-hwa, exhaled a breath tinged with excitement. It seemed she was regulating her emotions after releasing such a powerful surge of Gop-hwa.

This time, the purpose wasn't combat but to imbue the Fenghuo Sword with Gop-hwa.

Therefore, she must have released the Gop-hwa without holding back, unlike in battle.

-Glance

As she calmed her heightened emotions, Hong Yeon-hwa glanced in my direction. I tilted my head at the complex and intense look in her eyes.

Her gaze grew even more intense. Hong Yeon-hwa squeezed her eyes shut and then spun the sword around.

-Thud

She firmly drove the sword, which had been pointed towards the sky, back into its original position.

The Fenghuo Sword slid smoothly into place as if the grooves were perfectly aligned.

Normally, this would signal the end of the closing ceremony.

Choi Jiyeon opened her mouth to speak.

"With this, the annual banquet is officially—"

The guests, expecting this, were preparing to applaud.

"—But before we conclude, there's an announcement for the blood relatives of Gop-hwa."

They didn't get to applaud. Those who had been about to clap froze mid-action, blinking and exchanging glances.

Their looks seemed to ask, "Did you hear anything?" but none of them had an

answer.

At that moment, I began to walk forward as I had been instructed.

The sound of my footsteps echoed through the silence, drawing countless eyes towards me.

I climbed onto the platform, feeling the weight of all those gazes.

The guests' reactions upon seeing me ascend the platform were not confusion…

"?"

…but rather nods of understanding, as if they had expected this.

I, on the other hand, momentarily froze in surprise at their unexpected reaction.

My still-hazy mind couldn't fathom why the guests seemed to have anticipated this.

I glanced towards Choi Jiyeon, who nodded in return.

The Gop-hwa Clan has long preferred to show rather than tell.

This time, the confirmation? would be shown through actions as well.

"……"

Hong Yeon-hwa stepped back a few paces from the Fenghuo Sword.

The Gop-hwa within me still felt sticky.

It seemed she was having a hard time controlling her emotions.

Considering how her Gop-hwa had been unusually volatile throughout the banquet, perhaps she wasn't in the best condition.

Or maybe she was struggling to adapt to the intensity of her heightened emotions.

As if to take her place, I stood before the Fenghuo Sword and grasped its hilt.

-Swish…

Just like before, the Fenghuo Sword was drawn smoothly without any resistance.

The blade, which had glowed red earlier, had cooled down and returned to its transparent state.

I subtly used the Power of Observation to scan the surroundings.

The onlookers' eyes remained calm, as if they had expected this, showing little surprise.

"……"

Feeling a bit disgruntled, I began to gather my Qi.

Mana Affinity Expansion Ability

Homogenization…

'Gop-hwa.'

Whoosh! Flames clung to the blade.

The Gop-hwa that erupted from my right arm engulfed the Fenghuo Sword.

The transparent blade and the orange-lit room were stained with a deep red hue.

"……"

Eyes that looked ordinary, as if they had anticipated this.

"……?"

Eyes that blinked in confusion, sensing something amiss.

"……!"

Eyes that widened in shock and disbelief.

Finally, the eyes of those watching me filled with astonishment and amazement.

Now, that was the reaction I had expected.

Even in my unusually hazy state of mind.

Perhaps due to my heightened emotions, a childish sense of satisfaction welled up inside me.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Mental State]

▸Current Status

…

[Guilt]: The feeling of responsibility for something wrong that has been done.

[Satisfaction]: The feeling of fulfillment or contentment.

[Warmth]: A feeling, attitude, or atmosphere filled with kindness and comfort.

[Drunkenness]: The state of being intoxicated, resulting in a hazy mind.

[Emotional High]: The state of one's thoughts or emotions reaching their peak.

...

CHAPTER 139
MISTAKE

‘Mistake?’

‘How blatant.’

Hong Woo-sung, the Clan Leader of the Gale attending the regular banquet, shook his head inwardly at the scene unfolding at a slight distance.

Hong Yeon-hwa, the heir of the Gop-hwa Clan. With a manifestation of Gop-hwa’s power on an unprecedented level in the clan’s history, her succession as the clan head is practically assured.

She’s that renowned.

Every action she takes is more than enough to make headlines.

Of course, the media, wary of being wiped out by the Gop-hwa Clan, would have to tread carefully around what they write.

And beside Hong Yeon-hwa stood a young boy.

To be precise, Hong Yeon-hwa was holding a young boy in her arms, greeting guests who approached from all directions.

Blatant.

That was the thought that crossed his mind when he saw the scene.

Probably everyone attending the regular banquet thought the same.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who is almost certain to become the next clan head.

The boy she holds while attending the banquet…

Moreover, the boy's identity is that of the hot, no, scorching special admit student, the Young Hero of Shipnaha.

He's the one whose popularity skyrocketed after his fierce battle against Baek Ahrin, the heir of the Changhae Clan, in the Shio-ram Tournament.

And now, she's walking around the banquet hall holding such a person in her arms.

It was an overt signal.

A signal that said, "This person is mine, touch him and I'll kill you."

Not just Hong Woo-sung, but other attendees also understood the signal.

This signal would spread through word of mouth after the banquet, reaching far and wide.

And it's likely that both the next clan head and the head of operations intended for that to happen.

Hong Woo-sung shook his head and took a sip of his drink.

-Whoosh!

'?'

Until he saw the Gop-hwa release from the boy's grasp, he thought nothing more of it.

Hong Woo-sung's mouth dropped open. Not just his, but everyone nearby had their jaws drop as well.

It was Gop-hwa. It wasn't a rare phenomenon. Hong Woo-sung himself, as well as most of the branch family members of the Gop-hwa Clan, frequently

manifested Gop-hwa.

The problem was that this Gop-hwa erupted from the boy's… the special admit student's hand.

All those who understood the meaning of this scene had their mouths agape.

Some let out sighs, some released exclamations of joy, and others gasped in shock.

-Whoosh…!

'What?'

Until the Fenghuo Sword, the sword of the founder, began to change color, he had thought so.

* * *

The Fenghuo Sword of the founder, Hong Yeon, is currently used for ceremonial purposes.

It was originally a sword meant for battle. In the past, the founder Hong Yeon wielded the Fenghuo Sword to slaughter and burn to ashes the many monsters that surged forth into the world.

However, in the present, no one is able to wield the Fenghuo Sword of the founder, so it is now used as a ceremonial sword.

-Whoosh… The embers crackled.

The flames ignited from his right arm flickered and swirled around the Fenghuo Sword.

The blade gradually turned red as it absorbed the flames.

It was the same procedure as the Fenghuo Sword's engraving ritual. The

sword is infused with Gop-hwa, turning it into one's own color.

He narrowed his eyes.

He narrowed the range of observation and allocated more of his focus to the Fenghuo Sword.

As a result, he realized that the Fenghuo Sword had not truly been imbued with his color.

The blade had only heated up momentarily.

To put it metaphorically, it was like the surface was cooked, but the inside remained raw.

The Fenghuo Sword had only temporarily held his Gop-hwa, but it had not truly been stained.

He knew this, but there was no need to stain it.

The reason he went up the platform, grasped the Fenghuo Sword, and manifested Gop-hwa was merely to prove his affinity with Gop-hwa.

Having manifested Gop-hwa already, his task was done. Staining the Fenghuo Sword was not his job to do.

'But it seems like I could do it… '

Yet, he wanted to try.

In his hazy mental state.

The foggy rationality concluded it was possible.

The Fenghuo Sword of the founder Hong Yeon had already been stained.

It had been heated for a long time by his Gop-hwa, transforming it into a sword specialized for the founder's Gop-hwa.

This sword had become imbued with the founder's Gop-hwa, stained by his fire.

In other words, to wield this Fenghuo Sword, one would need to possess the same nature and harmonize with it.

'Homogenization.'

-Whoosh! The Gop-hwa quivered momentarily.

'Gop-hwa.'

The essence of homogenization is imitation.

To imitate, one needs the original's information.

He had ample information on Hong Yeon-hwa's Gop-hwa.

He had also accumulated a significant amount of information on Baek Ahrin's Changhae.

He had more than enough knowledge about Master's Midday Sun, allowing him to wield it proficiently.

It's difficult to wield the distinctive characteristics of different Gop-hwa in a more refined manner.

'I can do it… '

It's possible.

Imitation requires information.

And there is information. The Fenghuo Sword in his hand holds a wealth of information.

Although precise implementation is challenging, there's no reason to avoid the challenge. In fact, avoiding it would be wrong. Each challenge like this

would further elevate his abilities.

He tightened his grip on the handle as he observed the flames that swayed like they were facing a fierce storm.

He analyzed the information embedded within the Fenghuo Sword.

After reviewing the analyzed information, he arranged his mana accordingly.

-Whoosh!

The flames fluctuated. The once vigorously flickering flames momentarily turned yellow before turning red again.

A response of confusion emerged from one side.

'It's working.'

His hazy rationality didn't bother with that. Instead, it urged the flames to change further.

He implemented it. The information was more than sufficient, and despite his foggy mind, his ability to manipulate mana remained intact.

'It's working.'

-Crack.

A sound resonated from his grip on the handle.

The intensity of the flames changed.

The Gop-hwa coiled around the blade, gradually being absorbed into it.

This time, it wasn't just the surface that was stained.

He delved deeper, penetrating the core and applying color, staining it.

-Whoom…!!

The sword vibrated for a moment.

So powerful was the vibration that it made the surroundings tremble slightly.

The blade tinged red. In some parts, it turned yellow, and in between, it was painted orange.

The blade had been stained by Gop-hwa.

This time, it was different.

He instinctively realized that, and a strange sense of accomplishment filled him.

Had others also noticed this difference? Those who had been watching his Gop-hwa with their mouths agape opened their mouths even wider.

“Oh.”

Just as he was feeling satisfied, a startled sound emanated from somewhere.

It came from Choi Jiyeon, who had been watching from near the platform.

She opened her mouth wide.

“Oh… this wasn’t expected…”

Uttering words that she hadn’t anticipated, a bead of cold sweat trickled down Choi Jiyeon’s nape.

In the now chaotic banquet hall.

Hong Yeon-hwa suddenly embraced him tightly and led him outside the hall.

* * *

The Yeonhwa Hall, as its name implies, is a banquet hall. The interior of the building is well-equipped, and the exterior features a well-maintained pathway among other facilities.

Leaving behind the chaotic banquet hall, Hong Yeon-hwa led the staggering Lee Hayul outside.

The sun had long disappeared beyond the horizon, and a faint moonlight now bathed the ground.

The night air was quite refreshing.

Hong Yeon-hwa let out a deep breath as she draped her overgarment over her shoulders.

Her breath visibly exhaled into the chilly night air, which cooled her heated body.

'What was that?'

Whether inside or out, Hong Yeon-hwa was just as puzzled.

She too had a moment of brain freeze when she saw the Fenghuo Sword stained with color.

But she hadn't figured out the reason, so she simply followed her mother's advice and took Lee Hayul outside.

She let out a deep breath and looked down.

There, nestled close and nuzzling against her, was Lee Hayul.

The artifact around Lee Hayul's neck creaked.

[Wind?]

[Eh?]

[It’s warm.]

[Drew the Fenghuo Sword.]

[Gop-hwa.]

[Proof of protection.]

[I’m sorry…]

A series of voices poured out in quick succession. As Hong Yeon-hwa listened to them one by one, her expression turned odd.

Unlike usual, when things were appropriately filtered, now it felt like they were just pouring out indiscriminately.

[It’s soft.]

[Big chest.]

[I like it…]

[I’m sorry…]

“Ahem…”

It seems like the filter is a bit broken.

Hong Yeon-hwa shook her flushed face and then sat down on a nearby bench.

Lee Hayul, who was nestled in her arms, followed suit.

Naturally, Lee Hayul ended up sitting on her thighs.

A curious weight pressed down on her thighs, and her chest was filled with a satisfying sensation.

A sweet scent wafted up beneath her nose.

Hong Yeon-hwa cleared her throat and gently patted the Lee Hayul nestled in her arms.

-Whoosh…

[I'm cold.]

[Eh-!]

[It's chilly.]

[Ice.]

"Are you cold, Hayul?"

Lee Hayul nuzzled closer while complaining about the cold.

After wrapping his overgarment more securely, Hong Yeon-hwa buried him deeper into her embrace.

The necklace, which had been creaking from the cold, quieted down.

But it wasn't long before the necklace started creaking again, spouting unfiltered words.

"…He won't be able to speak clearly today."

Hong Yeon-hwa looked down at Lee Hayul with a curious expression and then suddenly let out a deep sigh.

Lee Hayul gets drunk easily.

To be precise, it's not just that he gets drunk easily, but he gets drunk just by the smell.

At that time, when Baek Ahrin had mentioned it, she thought it was

nonsense, but after seeing it today, she realized it was true.

Although Hong Yeon-hwa had purposely avoided her favorite alcohol, Lee Hayul still ended up drunk and wobbly.

On top of that, he had even used Gop-hwa.

Experiencing the emotional high that follows using Gop-hwa, he was likely not in his right mind at the moment.

Maybe that was why he had so recklessly poured his Gop-hwa into the Fenghuo Sword earlier.

Normally, he would have known better than to cause such an impact, but in his hazy state, Lee Hayul might not have realized it.

And if she were to confess to him now, his response likely wouldn't be a product of clear thinking.

'Ah… I really was going to say it this time.'

Ever since Lee Hayul visited the main house… she kept, kept intending to say it, but somehow, she just couldn't.

He's not in the room, the timing is off, he's too focused right now, the atmosphere isn't quite right for a confession…

As she piled on excuse after excuse, the day was pushed back to today.

In fact, those excuses were valid up until today. If she were to consider the atmosphere, today, with the banquet, was indeed the perfect time.

But now that Lee Hayul wasn't in his right mind…

"…Hayul."

With those thoughts, Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been gently stroking the silky

hair, suddenly opened her mouth with a curious expression.

“Do you like me?”

The necklace creaked.

[I like you.]

[I like you.]

[It’s warm.]

[I like you.]

[Thank you.]

“Pfft. So cute…”

[Eh-!]

[I like you.]

[Keep touching me.]

Hong Yeon-hwa chuckled and squished Lee Hayul’s cheek.

The constant stream of unfiltered affirmations reassured Hong Yeon-hwa.

She felt relieved even within the banquet hall.

She knew that Lee Hayul wasn’t fond of crowded places.

Pulling him into her embrace in such a place was, in fact, a move made without much confidence.

If Lee Hayul had shied away, uncomfortable and embarrassed, she would have understood intellectually but felt disheartened.

But Lee Hayul didn't resist.

Even if he was embarrassed, he didn't pull away from Hong Yeon-hwa's touch and didn't try to escape her embrace. He quietly let himself be held in her arms.

That relieved Hong Yeon-hwa.

It also gave her a strange sense of confidence.

'I'll tell him later, when he's sober.'

The urgency had lessened.

Her emotional impulse? It had grown more intense and overwhelming.

But she knew that if she endured this temptation, the sweetness of the reward would grow even more.

[I'm sorry.]

Hong Yeon-hwa decided to endure.

[I'm sorry…]

She was sure that if she endured a little longer, a sweet reward would follow.

[I'm so sorry for being so useless…]

"What's useless about you?"

Why was he apologizing so much? Why was he belittling himself so much?

Hong Yeon-hwa comforted Lee Hayul with a gentle smile.

Is it because he's such a kind and pure-hearted person that he feels guilt in strange places…

[Seo-yul…]

-Stop.

The hand that had been patting his bottom froze.

Her eyes blinked.

Seo-yul.

Seo-yul…

Seo-yul?

The name the necklace had uttered, corresponding to Lee Hayul's thoughts.

'Shin Seo-yul?'

A familiar name, following Baek Ahrin.

-Hic!

She gripped tightly.

Lee Hayul's body twitched. A faint sound, too soft to form words, escaped from his throat.

"Hey."

Hong Yeon-hwa didn't care.

"Who is Seo-yul?"

Her crimson eyes, once shining brightly, turned murky.

Her darkened gaze pierced down at the Lee Hayul nestled in her arms.

End of Chapter.

CHAPTER 140
KISS

Being in a dazed state means being exposed to danger.

With a foggy mind, it's impossible to make quick and accurate judgments.

If a dangerous situation arises, you won't be able to take appropriate action.

In a situation you could normally escape from, you might not be able to because your mind is clouded.

That's why I've always tried to maintain my focus.

No matter how comfortable the situation was, I kept a minimum level of vigilance.

I maintained a posture that would allow me to respond to any emergency.

As a person, there were times when emotions or desires got the better of me, but I mostly upheld that attitude.

Just now, that wasn't the case.

My mind, shrouded in mist, was unable to make a quick and precise judgment.

My body was sluggish and unsuitable for reacting to sudden changes.

My emotions were soft as if they were made of dough, lacking any sense of cold rationality.

-Crack!

‘Hik…!’

My dazed mind snapped awake all at once.

A sharp electric current surged up my spine and pierced through my head.

That dizzying sensation didn’t stop there; it spread throughout my entire body like it was flowing through my capillaries.

My back automatically straightened.

My body convulsed like a fish thrown onto land.

‘……!’

I instinctively suppressed the breath that was about to escape. It was a habit formed from the countless times I had suffered under the Curse of Silence.

Thanks to that habit, I avoided the pain of my neck being torn apart, but I couldn’t control my trembling body.

“Hey.”

Suddenly, I heard a familiar voice from above my head.

It was the voice of Hong Yeon-hwa, the one responsible for making me lower my guard.

…It was familiar, yet somehow different.

The voice itself hadn’t changed.

But something about the essence of the voice seemed different. Not just the voice, but the overall aura felt altered.

The warmth and gentle presence that once crackled like embers… now it seemed to be bubbling like lava on the verge of eruption.

I couldn't understand why.

My mind, which had only just awakened, couldn't grasp the situation in front of me.

My last memory was of igniting the Gop-hwa that I intended to infuse into the Fenghuo Sword.

'Ah.'

I realized why I ended up like this.

The reaction of Gop-hwa is an emotional surge.

Surrounded by alcohol and with the trustworthy Hong Yeon-hwa by my side, I had drawn out a tremendous amount of Gop-hwa to infuse into the Fenghuo Sword.

That must have caused my mind to completely shut down.

I remembered up to that point.

But I had no idea how I ended up in this position.

Unable to follow the situation, I blinked my eyes.

And then,

"Who is Seo-yul?"

Hearing the name that came out of Hong Yeon-hwa's mouth, my heart sank.

My body trembled violently, my mouth opened, and then closed again.

I tried recalling, but I hadn't misheard.

'How…?'

Lee Seo-yul.

Why did that name come out of Hong Yeon-hwa's mouth?

No one outside knew of Seo-yul's existence.

Even though I had created an identity for the baby, it wasn't connected to me in any way.

The only people I had informed were Professor Liana and Elia.

It was for safety.

Even with my limited intellect, I could deduce that revealing the connection between Seo-yul and me would bring no benefits.

When I briefly drew attention with my special admission during the 7th Round at the cradle, threats came my way.

Moreover, Seo-yul isn't human, but a fairy. Since fairies are a rare species that have scarcely ever appeared publicly, it's better to keep its identity hidden.

So, I concealed it.

I believed it was safer than revealing it.

I didn't even handle the baby's identity carelessly but entrusted it to Maxwell, a trustworthy figure from the original story. Even then, I didn't reveal the full identity to him.

I hadn't planned on hiding it from Hong Yeon-hwa either.

After all, we had become close, and I didn't want to create such a secret. I knew Hong Yeon-hwa wouldn't harm Seo-yul.

But at that time, I was too busy and mentally exhausted to inform her.

And yet…

Before I could tell her, Seo-yul's name came out of Hong Yeon-hwa's mouth.

The shock made my head buzz. Had the information leaked somewhere? Why was she asking me about Seo-yul's identity? Had the connection between Seo-yul and me been exposed?

My heart pounded. My still foggy mind spun furiously.

"…So you're not going to tell me?"

[Huh?]

At that moment.

In the midst of organizing my scrambled thoughts, Hong Yeon-hwa suddenly gritted her teeth and stood up.

Since I was nestled in her arms, I was naturally lifted along with her.

Startled by the sudden movement, I clung even tighter to Hong Yeon-hwa.

She glanced down at me with a strange expression and then, still holding me, started walking.

The once-crowded and noisy banquet hall quickly receded into the distance. Her pace was incredibly fast, and in an instant, we were far away.

The night wind blew harshly.

But thanks to the overgarment covering me and the warmth radiating from Hong Yeon-hwa, I wasn't cold.

Before I knew it, we had reached the main house's estate.

The guards standing by the main gate recognized Hong Yeon-hwa and bowed. However, upon seeing me in her arms, they flinched.

Without saying a word, Hong Yeon-hwa nodded.

That alone seemed to convey some understanding to them. They respectfully bowed their heads and opened the gate.

Hong Yeon-hwa walked through the gate and swiftly climbed the stairs, bypassing the elevator, heading to the upper floors.

A question mark floated above my head. The floor we arrived at was where the room I had gotten used to over the past few days… my assigned room was located.

'Why here… '

I tilted my head, but we passed by that room.

It wasn't my room. It was the room next to it… which Ariel had mentioned was Hong Yeon-hwa's room.

-Clack

Hong Yeon-hwa opened the door and entered the room without hesitation.

She slammed the door shut and stomped towards the bed.

Then, she plopped down on the edge of the bed.

"Haaah…"

Hong Yeon-hwa cracked her neck from side to side and let out a sigh. It was a breath filled with frustration and a complex mix of emotions.

"Hayul."

[Yes…]

Sensing the unusual atmosphere, I shrunk back and answered.

"I'm going to ask you again."

Shhh… Hong Yeon-hwa took off the overgarment draped over her shoulders.

The ornate red garment slipped off her shoulders. She grabbed it and carelessly tossed it onto a nearby coat rack.

“Answer me properly.”

Even after that, she didn’t seem to feel any relief. Hong Yeon-hwa undid her front and fanned herself with her hand.

Her pale skin and cleavage were blatantly exposed.

Her skin was so heated that sweat droplets formed on it, and steam was practically rising from her skin.

It was a rather embarrassing sight, but the tense atmosphere kept me silent.

“Who is Seo-yul?”

Hong Yeon-hwa’s crimson eyes looked down at me.

Her eyes, which I usually thought resembled beautiful rubies or warm flames.

Now they gave off a different impression. More than beauty, there was an eerie quality. More than warmth, they were filled with a strange, sticky sensation.

Looking down at me with those eyes, she repeated the same question as before.

Who is Lee Seo-yul?

I didn’t answer hastily.

Even during the short time it took to get here, I had been thinking about it, but I hadn’t sorted out my thoughts yet.

Seo-yul's current situation is extremely complicated.

Where should I start? Should I begin by explaining that the egg I obtained from The Tower of Growth hatched and Seo-yul was born from it…

No, before that, I should apologize for not telling her sooner.

Even though there were some circumstances, Hong Yeon-hwa might have felt hurt for hearing about it so late.

I briefly organized my thoughts. It was to avoid getting my words jumbled or conveying them awkwardly.

Just a moment.

Normally, a short time like this would have been enough.

"Why aren't you saying anything again?"

But for some reason, Hong Yeon-hwa's patience had already run out.

"Why?"

-Bang!

'……!'

A firework exploded right before my eyes. Even in the dimly lit room, the sparkles flickered in my vision.

It was similar to what had happened earlier. The sensation that shot up my spine and spread throughout my body made me tremble like a vibrator.

The difference this time… was that earlier it had been continuous, but now it was a brief, intense sensation.

It was that much more passionate.

-Phew…

A breath I hadn’t fully swallowed escaped my lips.

[Fireworks]

[Lights]

[Burning]

[Embarrassment]

[Bottom]

[Wait]

[Wait, just a moment]

“Huh? Why can’t you speak?”

A warm hand was placed on my burning bottom. It was Hong Yeon-hwa’s hand. She placed her hand there and rubbed it as if to soothe a wound.

The sensation was difficult to describe.

It stung, but felt strange.

It didn’t hurt. It was burning, but it wasn’t exactly painful.

As I trembled like a fool, unable to react, Hong Yeon-hwa once again raised her hand.

“Is there a reason you can’t speak? Huh?”

[Wait—]

-Crack…!

[—just…! Ahhh…]

“Why. I’m waiting, aren’t I? Answer quickly.”

A shock reverberated through me. The vibrations started from my bottom and spread throughout my body. The sensation was far too intense.

‘Kuh… ’

My body instinctively writhed. It was an unintentional, reflexive action.

“I endured so much, damn it…!”

-Bang!

“Who the hell wouldn’t be tempted, waving their tail around, pretending to be all righteous…!”

‘……!’

But Hong Yeon-hwa didn’t seem to like that, as she moved her hand again.

Before I could even process the sensation, another shock hit me.

The remnants of the previous sensation were tangled up with the new one.

My vision became colorful. It wasn’t a physical manifestation. It was as if my brain was perceiving the chaotic mix of sensations.

‘Urk… ’

Normally, I would have quickly shaken it off, but I wasn’t in a normal state.

A slight buzz, the heat from Hong Yeon-hwa that melted my vigilance, the emotional surge caused by Gop-hwa…

All these elements overlapped and piled up, reawakening the senses I had intentionally dulled.

Hong Yeon-hwa must have been in a similar state.

She had also been exposed to the smell of alcohol throughout the banquet and had poured a tremendous amount of Gop-hwa into the Fenghuo Sword.

It was hard to endure.

My eyes trembled involuntarily.

It felt like my face would melt away. Trying to hide it, I buried my face in her chest, which was right in front of me.

The sensation was different from what I usually felt.

Instead of feeling the texture of fabric, I felt smooth skin and the damp warmth of her body.

“Are you trying to run away again?”

I couldn’t enjoy the sensation for long. A hand burrowed into the nape of my neck, grabbing my cheek and pulling my face away from her chest.

“I don’t know anymore.”

Hong Yeon-hwa exhaled deeply. The sound was rough, like a predator preparing to devour its prey.

In fact, there were blood vessels bulging in Hong Yeon-hwa’s eyes, giving off a rather eerie feeling.

“I’ll do as I please now.”

The Hong Yeon-hwa I sensed through my observation was ablaze. A sticky fire was consuming other emotions, rapidly growing in size.

As if persuading herself, Hong Yeon-hwa muttered and moved her hands.

One hand wrapped around my waist tightly, while the other grabbed the

back of my head and tilted it backward.

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes suddenly trembled. Her gaze seemed to focus on my lips, and then she closed her eyes tightly, slowly lowering her head.

'Ah.'

It was instinctive… or rather, an intuitive realization.

I realized what Hong Yeon-hwa's actions were leading to.

An overwhelming sense of urgency surged within me.

I struggled to escape.

But her hand wrapped around my waist held me in place. The hand gripping the back of my head prevented me from turning away.

I was blocked. Simple movements wouldn't work. I needed to use strength.

I had to gather all my strength, pour in my mana…

'…But then… '

…But then, Hong Yeon-hwa would get hurt.

Even if it wasn't a severe injury, she might still get hurt.

Every other option was the same. There was no way to push Hong Yeon-hwa away without causing her harm. Even using the Power of Space to escape would be the same.

When my thoughts reached that point, my body automatically relaxed. My body went limp, and her face drew closer.

[Wait]

[No…]

[Just a moment…]

I couldn't resist with my actions. As a last resort, the Necklace of Confession clicked and emitted a pitiful cry of resistance.

But Hong Yeon-hwa, consumed by the emotional surge from Gop-hwa… didn't stop.

"…Do you hate me?"

She paused just before our lips touched and asked.

Her eyes trembled anxiously.

"Are you afraid of me now? Do you hate me?"

-Creak—!

Along with a rough metallic sound, the Necklace of Confession rattled.

[No, I like you]

It all happened so quickly that the filter didn't even have time to kick in.

The sound was so rough that I worried it might be drowned out.

But Hong Yeon-hwa seemed to understand, as a relieved smile spread across her face.

My head tilted back, and Hong Yeon-hwa's face… her lips drew closer.

-Smooch

They touched.

A soft sensation pressed against my lips.

An emotion was conveyed.

‘Ah.’

There are many kinds of love.

There’s romantic love between a couple, love between friends, and the love that parents give to their children.

The ways in which these feelings are expressed are also incredibly diverse. People express their affection through countless actions and words.

Since I didn’t receive much love growing up, I found it difficult to recognize such things.

I would sometimes wonder if someone was showing consideration for me… but then I’d start doubting whether it was real, whether they genuinely cared for me, or if I was just misunderstanding.

Indirect and vague expressions were hard to understand.

That’s why direct and primal expressions were easier for me to comprehend.

A pat on the head, a comforting touch, a warm embrace…

Offering a place of complete vulnerability, sharing the sound of one another’s heartbeats, and exchanging body heat.

These kinds of expressions left no room for doubt. I could understand the emotions conveyed through touch.

And for someone like me, there was one very clear and direct way to understand an expression of love.

A kiss.

A declaration of love.

“…Huh?”

A dazed sound escaped from Hong Yeon-hwa, her face flushed as red as an apple.

-Bling!

The mysterious alarm that had been quiet for a while now rang in my ears.

A soft sensation pressed against my entire body.

A fragrant scent wafted up to my nose.

A sweet liquid seeped into my mouth.

Through the blurry vision, I could see her wide, red eyes staring at me.

.

.

.

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul→Hong Yeon-hwa

●●●●●●●●○○(86/100)

[?] [Indebtedness] [Gratitude] [Warmth] [Security]

▼Dramatic Change▼

Lee Hayul→Hong Yeon-hwa

♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♡(86▷90/100)

[Love] [Indebtedness] [Gratitude] [Warmth] [Security]

…

[Player Adjustment System: Pioneering Degree]

[Quest [Affection] achieved]

[Quest [Hong Yeon-hwa] achieved]

[A large amount of points have been accumulated]

…

[Part of the conditions for breaking the [Curse of Silence] have been met]

[The [Curse of Silence] has been weakened conditionally (related to Hong Yeon-hwa)]

…

[Part of the conditions for breaking the [Curse of Loneliness] have been met]

[The [Curse of Loneliness] has been weakened conditionally (related to Hong Yeon-hwa)]

End of Chapter.

CHAPTER 141
THE NIGHT OF ENDURANCE

The moonlight, brighter than before, slipped through the curtains and subtly illuminated the room.

In the center of the room was a massive bed, upon which two people were tightly embracing each other.

"…The Wish Egg? From that egg you were joking about frying at The Tower of Growth… a fairy came out of it?"

Hong Yeon-hwa tried to regain her composure, piecing together the information she had just received.

[Yes.]

Lee Hayul confirmed, continuing with his explanation.

"And that fairy recognized you as its dad… And you named the fairy Seo-yul… 'Lee Seo-yul'?"

[Yes.]

"Lee Seo-yul… not Shin Seo-yul?"

[Huh?]

[Why would Shin Seo-yul come up all of a sudden…]

Hong Yeon-hwa's mouth hung open as she processed the situation.

A sense of dizziness spread throughout her entire body.

It felt like the ground beneath her feet was cracking open, plunging her into an unfathomable abyss.

It was as if the world was mocking her, saying she had made a wrong choice…

Just moments ago, the name “Seo-yul” had slipped from Lee Hayul’s lips while he was in her embrace.

He was drunk, emotionally heightened by the manifestation of Gop-hwa, and yet he had casually mentioned ‘Seo-yul’ without the honorific “Nim” like he usually would.

Among the people she knew, the only person Lee Hayul could be referring to as ‘Seo-yul’ was Shin Seo-yul.

At that instant, her rationality snapped. Her head filled with intense heat, threatening to explode, causing her to act on a long-suppressed desire.

And now, she deeply regretted that. She wanted to go back in time and beat her past self.

‘No… ’

It was absurd.

Who would have guessed that it wasn’t Shin Seo-yul, but someone else entirely?

No one could have imagined that an egg, previously joked about as something to fry, would hatch a fairy, and that the fairy would see Lee Hayul as a parent and be named after his close friend Seo-yul.

She felt wronged.

Hong Yeon-hwa grabbed her throbbing head.

Her hair caught in her grasp.

It seemed like it had grown a bit longer, indicating it was time for a trim. The urge to just tear it all out welled up within her.

Guilt also surged up. Her chest felt tight and suffocated.

Even though Hayul hadn't done anything wrong, she had misunderstood on her own and acted out violently.

"Hayul, I… I'm sorry. I misunderstood and did something awful—"

"Sniff… sniff…"

"—to youuu…"

A sound echoed from near her chest. Hong Yeon-hwa's body trembled. She squeezed her eyes shut as she felt breathing against her cleavage.

The shameful desire that had subsided earlier resurfaced.

Though it was significantly weaker than before, her emotions were still stirred.

Suppressing her desire in an instant, Hong Yeon-hwa let out a deep sigh and glanced down at her chest.

Nestled there was Lee Hayul, clinging tightly to her.

Hong Yeon-hwa lay beside him, holding him close as they rested on the bed. With a complicated expression, she gently patted his back.

In response, Lee Hayul tilted his head back, revealing his face that had been buried in her chest.

"……"

Lee Hayul usually kept his eyes closed.

It wasn't a secret known only to Hong Yeon-hwa; by now, nearly everyone who knew the name Lee Hayul was aware of it.

The sight of him walking confidently with his eyes closed, even during battles where he drew his weapon, was enough to capture people's attention.

One day, Hong Yeon-hwa had cautiously asked him about it, and he had explained that since he didn't use his eyes to see, there was no need to keep them open.

He mentioned that keeping them open made his eyes feel unnecessarily sore, so it was more comfortable to keep them shut.

"……"

Hong Yeon-hwa blinked.

Her eyelids opened and closed. It was a natural bodily function. Most creatures with eyes did the same.

Lee Hayul blinked.

His tightly shut eyelids parted, revealing the eyes that had been hidden until now.

Their gazes met.

His gray eyes stared into Hong Yeon-hwa's.

Hong Yeon-hwa held her breath.

Gray eyes…

It wasn't an extremely rare color. If you looked around carefully, you could find plenty of people with gray eyes.

But there was a difference. Lee Hayul's eyes lacked vitality.

Gray itself was a dull color, but without any light in them, his eyes resembled those of an ancient corpse.

Yet, they were beautiful. Despite the lifelessness, the dull gray eyes were paradoxically so pretty and beautiful.

And unlike those eyes, Lee Hayul was alive and breathing.

His unfocused eyes quivered. Even as his gaze swept across the room, his eyes couldn't seem to lock onto anything.

Eventually, his gaze settled on Hong Yeon-hwa.

The focus sharpened.

It felt like his eyes were solely capturing her, nothing else.

It was then that Lee Hayul frowned, seemingly frustrated that things weren't going as he wanted.

-Thump!

Hong Yeon-hwa's heart pounded harshly.

Just moments ago, his expression had been somewhat otherworldly, but now it had suddenly transformed into an adorably endearing one.

'So cute… No, wait.'

Hong Yeon-hwa's lips twitched as she reached out her hand.

As her hand approached, Lee Hayul tightly shut his eyes. Her slender fingers gently caressed his eyelids.

"If it hurts, don't force them open. Just keep them closed."

Why had his eyes opened?

Congenital disabilities are incredibly difficult to overcome, even after awakening as a superhuman or receiving help from another superhuman.

In some cases, even with all kinds of miraculous remedies and the aid of a top-tier healing hero, it's still challenging to resolve.

Lee Hayul was one such case, yet now his eyes were open.

When asked why, Lee Hayul stuttered and found it hard to answer clearly.

"You don't have to answer. If you feel like talking later, tell me. If you don't want to say it even then, it's okay not to mention it."

[Nnng…]

She didn't probe any further. She figured Lee Hayul had his own reasons and, given his hesitation, it was likely a sensitive issue.

Besides, the guilt she felt from her earlier actions still lingered.

The thought of asking, especially after she'd spanked him and pinned him down, felt far too hypocritical…

Suddenly, Lee Hayul, who had been calmly being petted, tilted his head forward.

The distance between their faces shrank. The closer proximity filled her vision entirely with his face.

Lee Hayul, with his barely open eyes, took in the sight of Hong Yeon-hwa's face while his lips twitched.

There was something awkward about it.

It seemed like even opening his eyes and moving his lips was unfamiliar to

him.

For a while, as if trying to get the hang of it, he moved his lips around awkwardly before slowly parting them.

And then…

“Kiss…”

“Gasp…”

Hong Yeon-hwa sharply inhaled.

A beautiful voice she had never heard before gently caressed her eardrums.

Though she wasn’t particularly talented in music or singing, she had heard many sounds before. Among those, there was nothing that could compare to this voice.

“Kiss… please.”

Her body trembled as if an earthquake had struck. The pleasure that started from her ears swirled through her entire body.

And his voice had emerged too.

A child who had lived their whole life mute suddenly, at this moment, also found their voice along with their sight.

But there was no time to dwell on that puzzle.

Gop-hwa within her subtly stirred its head. The intense and dark impulse began to bubble up all at once.

‘Ugh… ’

She took all her willpower to suppress the impulse.

Right now, she couldn't afford to give in to her desires. Hong Yeon-hwa, who had already acted on a misunderstanding earlier, was determined not to lose control again.

She slowly lowered her face, and Lee Hayul obediently closed his eyes.

Smooch… Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes squeezed shut as she felt the soft, moist sensation against her lips. The dizzying sensation clouded her mind, her breath quickening as her desires stirred.

As if it wasn't enough, Lee Hayul rubbed his lips against hers several times.

It was clumsy. Or perhaps, it would be better described as cute. Like a baby bird pecking lightly, it was a gentle kiss.

"Smooch… Smooch…"

Their lips brushed together, breaths mingling. The characteristic sweet, honey-like scent of his skin tickled her nose, causing Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes to twitch.

"Smooch… Pha…"

"Ah…"

Their lips, which had been rubbing and pressing together repeatedly, finally parted.

The warm, soft sensation faded away, leaving a momentary sound of disappointment.

Then, as if to retreat, Lee Hayul buried his face back into Hong Yeon-hwa's chest, letting out a small, excited breath.

"Sniff… sniff…"

'Hik… '

He didn't just bury his face.

Previously, he had only buried his face into her chest, but this time, he opened her collar and pressed his face deep into the exposed bosom, shamelessly sniffing her scent.

While it's natural for people to breathe, this went beyond that—there was a blatant intention to take in her scent.

"Uhh… it smells…"

To be honest, it was embarrassing.

Letting someone smell your body is more embarrassing than most might think.

Especially since it was her cleavage—a place where her natural scent was particularly potent.

Her face, already red as a ripe persimmon, felt like it was going to burst with heat.

It was a different kind of embarrassment compared to when she had buried her nose in Lee Hayul's hair and sniffed his scent.

Though the areas were different… Wasn't this like poetic justice?

Hong Yeon-hwa found herself unable to push him away, quietly offering her chest.

"Sniff… sniff…"

"Do you like it?"

[I like it.]

[It smells good.]

[I’m happy.]

To be honest, she didn’t dislike it. In fact, she kind of liked it.

It was like watching a puppy cuddle up to its owner, acting all affectionate. He was such a lovable child. All she needed to do was hold back her impulses.

“It doesn’t smell too strong?”

Hong Yeon-hwa asked, her lips trembling. She was embarrassed that she had lain down on the bed without washing, too excited earlier. She had even sweated a bit…

[It smells like milk.]

[It’s really strong.]

[Sweet.]

“Oh…”

The response was even more embarrassing than she had imagined. He said her chest smelled like milk. How was she supposed to take that? At least it wasn’t sweat…

Her face, already as red as a ripe persimmon, turned even redder.

“Oh, um… Sorry. I can’t produce milk yet… But I’ll make sure you can have some later…”

Hong Yeon-hwa awkwardly patted Lee Hayul’s head as he rubbed against her chest.

[I like it.]

[I’m happy.]

[Milk?]

“Okay…”

‘Ugh… ’

Her body tensed.

Lee Hayul burrowed deeper into her embrace.

Her clothes loosened further as he buried his face into the depths of her cleavage.

His hair rubbed against her skin, his excited breaths and the sound of his sniffing blatantly felt in the depths of her cleavage.

Occasionally, his lips—pressed tight—would part, expressing his tender affection.

Meanwhile, the Necklace of Confession dangling from his neck constantly clicked, echoing embarrassing sounds.

“……”

Her rationality was being battered from all sides. Any moment now, she felt she might lose herself to her impulses and pin down Lee Hayul.

But as guilty as she felt, Hong Yeon-hwa knew she couldn’t let that happen.

If she gave in to her desires and pinned him down again, she wouldn’t be able to face herself anymore.

Clenching her teeth quietly to avoid making a sound, Hong Yeon-hwa squeezed her eyes shut.

In the process, she adjusted her posture so that Lee Hayul could be more comfortable.

She had to endure it.

This was her punishment.

It was a penalty born from her own mistakes.

Reminding herself of that, she endured the night, holding Lee Hayul quietly in her arms until the morning sun rose.

'…Come to think of it, it's not all my fault. That woman's to blame too.'

Shin Seo-yul.

Why did her name have to be the same?

Hong Yeon-hwa silently cursed Shin Seo-yul.

Whether it made logical sense or not wasn't the issue. Hong Yeon-hwa just needed someone to blame, someone to shift a portion of the responsibility onto.

For the manifestation of Gop-hwa, a technique was necessary to offload some blame onto others to maintain a healthy mind.

* * *

-Ding!

[Contact: Gop-hwa Hong]

▸Gop-hwa Hong: That wretched woman

"What's this woman up to now?"

Shin Seo-yul, who had barely had any time to rest during the break and had been diligently heading to the dungeon each day, frowned.

On her way to the dungeon, she received a sudden message from her friend

containing a brief expletive.

Then, she suddenly shivered and rubbed her arms.

It felt as if goosebumps were creeping up her skin.

Her instincts warned her that, despite not being at fault, some form of punishment was coming her way.

'…Should I take the day off?'

Something felt off. Today didn't seem like her day.

She might end up getting hurt and make the dungeon her final resting place.

Quickly making up her mind, Shin Seo-yul turned around.

End of Chapter.

CHAPTER 142
STATUS WINDOW OBSERVATION (1)

—

It was nearly impossible to open my eyelids.

No matter how hard I tried, my eyelids would only slightly lift, and when they did, my eyes ached and stung.

Even then, it wasn't as if I could see anything properly.

When I opened my eyes, an endlessly dark world spread out before me.

It felt like a deep ocean where no light could reach, or like a universe where the stars and moon had vanished, leaving only darkness.

The color was no different from when my eyes were closed.

Whether my eyes were open or closed, the world remained dark.

If I let all the information I observed slip away, the world would still be dark.

But the darkness seen with open eyes felt even more repulsive.

Of course, it didn't matter much anyway, as the power concentrated on spatial perception functioned normally, making me something akin to a person with a disability.

In any case, I hadn't opened my eyes since the first day I arrived in this world.

I opened my eyes.

As I lifted my face from where it had been buried, a strong red color imprinted on my retinas.

Red hair tickled my nose, almost touching it, and beneath that red hair lay white skin…

It was Hong Yeon-hwa. She was holding me close, gently breathing as she slept.

I was deeply buried in her warm embrace, feeling her comforting body heat.

I blinked blankly.

Red and flesh-colored… Familiar colors.

I wasn't born with congenital visual impairment, so these were colors I had seen countless times in my previous world.

Moreover, I had perceived the world using a higher sense, interpreting vast amounts of information through the Power of Observation, which was incomparable to vision.

In fact, the world seen through the eyes might be far more limited, frustrating, and inferior compared to the information I observed.

But the world seen through the eyes was different.

It felt entirely different from what was conveyed by information. It was a strangely novel feeling.

People are so foolish and dull-witted that they only realize the value of something important after they lose it.

I was one of those people.

I hadn't realized the value of my dimly visible eyes until they were taken away for a while, and only then did I understand their importance.

'…What is this?'

The effort it took to blink was awkward.

I touched around my eyelids with a puzzled expression.

Colors imprinted on my retinas—red and flesh-colored. Nothing else was visible.

I glanced around, and a thick fog met my gaze.

The fog was so thick that I couldn't see even an inch in front of me.

I began to wonder if anything existed on the other side at all.

I turned my gaze in the opposite direction, but the fog was still there.

I looked up and down, but the fog filled every direction.

Even when I cautiously surveyed left and right, all I saw was fog.

The only exception was Hong Yeon-hwa and the small area around her.

In the dim gray fog, Hong Yeon-hwa was the only thing with distinct colors.

'…What the.'

I couldn't help but feel bewildered.

Yesterday… As soon as I kissed Hong Yeon-hwa, my eyes opened.

For the first time, I saw Hong Yeon-hwa's face with my own eyes. Although I had consistently recognized her through the information I observed, seeing her with my own eyes stunned me—she was so beautiful that my mind froze.

But I couldn't see anything around Hong Yeon-hwa.

A fog-like mist had filled the area, completely blocking my view.

‘This is ridiculous.’

It was truly an absurd situation.

I didn’t even know why my vision had returned, and now, even though it had, my field of view was barely half of what it should be. My head spun…

And then…

“Sniff… Sniff…”

Suddenly, my nose twitched.

This had happened before. Even though I couldn’t detect scents, I would react like this whenever I was near something I disliked… or when I got close to someone.

Now, I could clearly smell something.

The source of the overwhelmingly strong scent was right in front of my nose.

It was the flesh that rose and fell with Hong Yeon-hwa’s exhalations. The chest I had clung to all night, whining and taking comfort.

“……”

I lowered my head again, pressing my face deep into the ample chest.

The bridge of my nose nestled into her flesh, filling my nostrils with an intense scent of her body.

It was sweet and savory. It smelled like warm milk.

The soft texture supporting my face, the incredibly warm body heat, and Hong Yeon-hwa’s scent filling my nose…

My body relaxed on its own, melting away. My mind swayed, drunk on happiness.

“So good…”

[Happy.]

[Happy.]

[I like it.]

[Happy…]

…

I was happy.

There was no room for argument. The substance called happiness was emanating from my entire being.

Right now, I was the happiest person in the world.

I wanted to stay like this forever.

I wanted to continue being spoiled and doted on while nestled in Hong Yeon-hwa’s embrace.

Forever and always.

And to do that… To live happily ever after, there must be no threats.

Moreover, such threats usually cannot be resolved by doing nothing. One must take action to subdue and eliminate them.

For me, threats are disastrous events that shake the world… The Tower invasions.

The Tower of Purgatory, The Tower of Eternal Winter, The Tower of Necromancy…

For the sake of a happy future, I had to stop the chaos brought by the Towers.

‘This outing is for that purpose.’

I would leave Gop-hwa Clan and find the dungeon, ‘The Lake of Mana.’

The Lake of Mana was filled with pure mana inside, making it an ideal place for enhancing one’s magical abilities.

Moreover, it was a rare dungeon that did not spawn many monsters to repel intruders… In short, it was a goldmine-like treasure trove.

Though finding and entering it was somewhat difficult in the original story, with the Power of Observation and the Power of Space, it should be possible to enter with just a bit of time.

‘The Proof of Protection is there too.’

Additionally, the Lake of Mana held an artifact in the form of a prosthetic arm called ‘The Proof of Protection.’

If I could be recognized as its owner, I could both fill the void in my arm and increase my combat power.

However, the Proof of Protection was picky and required a compatible owner. As far as I remembered, it judged based on personality.

If I couldn’t become its owner… I would just sell it off and get my arm properly restored.

I had delayed the restoration so far, hoping I could use the Proof of Protection, but if not, there was no reason to keep my arm empty.

Also, near the dungeon was the base of a power that would become a future hindrance.

Since it was still in its early stages and hadn’t grown much yet, it would be easier to go there now and destroy it completely, making things easier later on.

In short, I needed to act quickly.

“Ugh…”

With a sense of resignation, I forced myself to get up.

As I did, Hong Yeon-hwa’s arms tightened around me.

She squirmed and fussed for a moment before grabbing the large pillow next to her and hugging it in my place.

Hong Yeon-hwa hadn’t slept properly through the night. Though her eyes twitched as if she sensed something was off, she soon fell back into a deep sleep, breathing evenly.

I got down from the bed.

Even with my barely open eyes, all I could see was fog. In the end, I closed my eyes again.

First, I opened the refrigerator in the room and took out a drink.

Judging by the label, it seemed to be orange juice. The glass bottle holding the contents looked quite luxurious, suggesting even this was a high-end product.

‘The smell… still doesn’t come.’

I opened the cap and sniffed, but there was no scent resembling orange.

Instead, a few other smells reached me.

The common factor among them was that they all originated from Hong Yeon-hwa… In other words, they were scents from her body.

With a strange expression, I took a sip of the drink.

It was refreshing.

But I couldn't taste it. Last night, when I was whining and licking Hong Yeon-hwa's skin, I could taste it…

When my eyes opened, both my sense of taste and smell returned.

But something was off, as if they hadn't fully returned.

And my speech had changed too.

"Ah—Hic…!"

-Cough.

It had changed awkwardly.

No sooner had I spoken than a searing pain shot through the back of my throat. I was somewhat accustomed to pain by now, so I didn't roll around on the floor in agony.

I had spoken just fine yesterday, but now, it was like this again.

I had a rough idea of what was going on.

'……'

I returned to the bed.

Hong Yeon-hwa was still sleeping soundly.

A pang of guilt hit me. The reason she hadn't slept properly last night was because she had indulged my whims.

I grabbed the disheveled blanket and pulled it up to cover her chest, then calmly opened my mouth.

"Yeon, hwa…"

My guess was correct.

My voice worked the same way as before.

It only worked when I was talking to ‘Hong Yeon-hwa.’

‘…What is this.’

Eyes that only saw Hong Yeon-hwa, a nose that only smelled her scent, a tongue that only tasted her… Something was off about this tongue, and speech that only worked with her…

The sensory seals had been lifted. But not completely.

The Curse of Silence had been broken. But it was only partially broken.

I hadn’t done anything.

I hadn’t used the Jewel of the Sea, nor had I used the wish-granting power of the Tower.

What on earth caused the curse to become so strange after… the kiss?

I had a hunch…

‘……’

With a deep sigh, I opened my eyes.

The fog was thick. As soon as Hong Yeon-hwa disappeared from my sight, all I could see was fog.

The fog was so dense that I could barely see an inch ahead…

[…?…!]

[…!……]

[……]

In the corner of my vision, something small and rectangular faintly shimmered in midair.

When I shifted my gaze, the rectangle followed, sticking to the edge of my vision.

‘Damn it… ’

What could that be?

As someone familiar with games… especially familiar with the game *Savior*, I could guess its identity.

And so, I couldn’t help but curse.

Grinding my teeth, I rubbed my face.

‘Status window… ’

The player’s number one helper for growth.

‘So it was attached after all… ’

I felt so deflated that my knees buckled…

.

.

.

[Player Adjustment System: Affection]

Lee Hayul → Hong Yeon-hwa

♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♡ (90▷91/100)

[Affection] [Milk] [Sense of Debt] [Gratitude] [Warmth] [Security] [Softness]

CHAPTER 143
STATUS WINDOW OBSERVATION (2)

—

A status window.

In RPG games and such, it's a common concept that's practically scattered everywhere—a convenient setting that conveys a character's information and abilities in numerical form.

In the original game *Savior*, there was a more expansive and convenient system than the typical status window.

The Player Adjustment System.

This system, often referred to simply as the "status window," was designed to support players in every way possible, as the name suggests.

Though players could set up their character before starting a new round, the fundamental reason why players could show remarkable growth speed and break through limits was thanks to this system.

This status window was divided into several parts according to the aspects it adjusted.

The status window primarily used three main features.

First, the Measurement.

This feature functions just like the status windows you typically see.

It objectively measures the state of an entity and delivers the results numerically.

When used on a player, it reveals stats, unique abilities, powers, and their mental state.

The mental state here includes the physical, psychological, and spiritual condition.

For example, it could encompass species, the degree of physical injury, mental illnesses, buffs and debuffs applied, soul corruption, and even titles that could be used to refer to the entity.

As such, the Measurement provides the player with specs and allows them to instantly increase stats and the performance of unique abilities using points, or to enhance their growth rate.

Second, the Pioneer.

This feature functions as a quest window.

As players wander around, the status window automatically issues quests. Completing these quests grants the player points.

Typical quests include monster extermination, dungeon exploration, rescuing lives, winning the affection of specific characters, and resolving major incidents.

The points earned through these quests can then be used to further the player's growth.

And third, the Affection.

The Affection feature wasn't directly useful to the player.

It allowed players to pay points to peek at how other characters viewed them and their affection levels.

The thoughts of others are displayed as combinations of words or sentences.

From basic emotions like affection, dislike, mistrust, trust, gratitude, fear, guilt, murderous intent, and hatred…

To key phrases that describe how others perceive the player, such as ‘crazy bastard,’ ‘idiot,’ ‘criminal,’ ‘hero,’ ‘benefactor,’ and so on.

The scores ranged from 0 to 100.

A score between 0 and 9 indicated hostility. It corresponded to feelings like hatred, contempt, or murderous intent.

A score between 10 and 19 indicated dislike. While it didn’t mean they wanted to tear you apart, it was enough to make them want to avoid you.

A score between 20 and 29 indicated indifference, a relationship with no particular feelings either way.

A score between 30 and 39 indicated an ordinary relationship with little interaction.

A score between 40 and 49 indicated a moderate relationship that neither disliked nor particularly liked each other.

A score between 50 and 59 indicated a relationship with mild affection.

A score between 60 and 69 indicated a relationship where affection had accumulated considerably.

A score between 70 and 79 indicated a relationship where a strong bond was felt.

A score between 80 and 89… This part was difficult to define.

This level of score was usually reached in relationships with deep ties or when a family member had extraordinary affection.

And a score between 90 and 99 indicated something beyond that—a deep

bond.

It was a score that would be achieved when someone was so important to a character that they could be considered their entire life.

I had never managed to reach 100. Through various playthroughs, marriages, and winning over many characters' affection, I could only reach the upper 80s or, at most, the low 90s.

There are other status window features as well.

The Creation feature, where you could pour points into easily creating equipment or facilities.

The Transaction feature, which allowed you to procure supplies like warm chicken even in dangerous places like the Demonic Realm or dungeons, using points.

There were various features, but I didn't really use them.

The Creation feature could have been useful in the early stages, but the quality of the equipment or facilities produced was unsatisfactory. The Transaction feature was also too expensive to use often, even in the early stages.

What I mainly used were the Measurement, Pioneer, and Affection features.

The Measurement was essential, as it provided a numerical representation of my stats and allowed me to strengthen my stats and unique abilities. It was the foundation of the status window, so of course, I used it frequently.

Naturally, I also used the Pioneer feature often.

The Pioneer was the main source of points for player growth, so there was no choice but to use it.

Moreover, if I wandered around suspicious areas, the Pioneer would

automatically issue quests and provide clues.

By receiving quests in advance, I could also anticipate future events.

The Affection feature was quite useful in its own way.

Since I could clearly see how others perceived me, if I detected any murderous intent, I could discreetly eliminate the threat, or if someone genuinely trusted me, I could keep them close.

'…Or maybe not.'

A sudden thought stiffened my face.

If someone had murderous intent or deep hostility toward me, I would eliminate them discreetly. If they trusted me, I would keep them close.

I once got seriously burned acting on judgment based solely on Affection.

In the 8th playthrough.

In the 8th playthrough, Baek Ahrin certainly 'trusted' the player. Her Affection was also high. There was no sign of emotions that could promote betrayal.

While I was in the midst of conquering an unconquered Tower, the previously quiet Tower Master of The Tower of Eternal Winter suddenly launched an attack on our territory, forcing me to halt the Tower's conquest and rush back to the frontlines.

During the ensuing battle with the Tower Master, I was stabbed in the back and killed by Baek Ahrin.

Even at that moment, Baek Ahrin's Affection remained intact.

'Baek Ahrin from the 8th playthrough… '

I tried to recall Baek Ahrin's Affection from the 8th playthrough.

'Her Affection was at 83… Her emotional state showed trust and affection. And… '

Hope and longing.

Hope is the emotion of expecting and desiring to achieve or obtain something.

Longing is a deep desire and yearning.

In the 8th playthrough, Baek Ahrin had great expectations of the player.

Yet, in the end, it was Baek Ahrin who ended the player's life by stabbing them in the back.

Even considering Baek Ahrin's special nature as 'the Mask,' Affection could not be unconditionally trusted as an indicator.

'…This is a pointless worry.'

I realized that I was indulging in needless worries.

I let out a small laugh and gently opened my eyes.

The hazy fog. In a corner of my foggy vision, the status window was visible.

[……]

[……]

[…!…!……!]

[……]

[……!……]

[……]

‘…I can’t see… ’

I could see the outline of the status window. But I couldn’t read the text written on it. No matter how hard I strained my eyes to focus on the status window, I couldn’t make out the contents.

Even using the Power of Observation didn’t help.

How could the Power of Observation fail to penetrate it? It was absurd.

Does that mean the status window is a power on the same level as the Power of Observation?

‘Open the status window, open the Measurement.’

No response.

‘Open the Pioneer, open the Affection, open the Creation… ’

No response.

Even if I pretended to talk to Hong Yeon-hwa and muttered the commands, the result was the same…

My eyelids twitched. I reached out into the air.

My arm passed through the holographic status window with a swish. Even when I waved it around, there was no sign of it distorting.

‘What the heck is this… ’

I could confirm that the status window existed, but I couldn’t use it. It was like a rice cake in a picture—right in front of me, but unusable.

Frustration boiled inside me.

Before, its existence wasn't even certain, and I couldn't use it.

Now? I could confirm its existence, but I couldn't use it even though it was right in front of my eyes.

If I could just use it, I could grow much faster than I am now, so why…

It felt like the stress was going to make all my hair fall out.

I couldn't help but sigh.

.

.

.

Through this regular ball, I officially revealed that I had manifested Gop-hwa.

This allowed me to freely use Gop-hwa in my current identity as Lee Hayul.

At the same time, from now on, I would be treated as a de facto member of the Gop-hwa Clan.

Gop-hwa was a unique ability passed down through bloodlines.

For me, it was merely an imitation, but it was only natural that someone who had manifested Gop-hwa would be treated as a member of the Gop-hwa Clan.

Moreover, the Gop-hwa I manifested was quite powerful, so I was treated with a certain level of respect while staying with the Gop-hwa Clan over the past few days.

[Thank you for taking care of me these past few days.]

[Thanks to you, I was able to stay comfortably.]

"I'm relieved to hear that you were able to rest comfortably."

At the main gate, where the protective barrier was installed.

Choi Jiyeon, who had come to see me off as the head lady of the clan, smiled faintly.

“It would have been nice if you could stay a few more days…”

[I’m really grateful for your offer, but I have things to do during the vacation.]

I kept bowing my head apologetically in response to Choi Jiyeon’s regretful words.

Seeing this, Choi Jiyeon’s expression turned curious.

She appeared to find my behavior strange.

And rightly so.

Even to myself, my demeanor felt awkward and hesitant, unlike before.

But there was a reason for it.

A few days ago, Choi Jiyeon was just the parent of a friend.

Now, things were different.

Last night.

Hong Yeon-hwa had confirmed her affection for me so thoroughly that there was no room for doubt. There was no question that I wasn’t mistaken.

The soft and moist sensation that had pressed against my lips was still vividly clear.

Equally vivid were the memories associated with the scent.

I had been living accustomed to a world without scents. But the moment my sense of smell returned, I was overwhelmed by the intense and rich scent of

flesh.

It was such a warm and comforting aroma that my mind melted away throughout the night.

If I were to make an analogy, it would be like giving a starving carnivorous animal, on the brink of death, a truckload of premium meat. Their eyes would go wild.

The memory of last night was still fresh.

So vivid was the memory that whenever it resurfaced, my face would flush with heat.

'Since we kissed… We'll probably get married in the future.'

It was a simple story.

I liked Hong Yeon-hwa. And Hong Yeon-hwa liked me too.

We kissed, so we'll probably get married in the future.

While I was still far from being prepared to be a spouse or a parent, and though the world might change in unpredictable ways… if I achieved my goal, that's what would happen.

When that happens, Choi Jiyeon would become my mother-in-law.

It was a completely different weight compared to being the parent of a friend.

I couldn't help but feel my behavior stiffen…

"…Ahem, the air feels a bit chilly today. I'll head back inside now."

Choi Jiyeon glanced at me and Hong Yeon-hwa, cleared her throat with a short cough, and bowed her head slightly.

[Ah.]

[Yes.]

[Thank you very much for seeing me off.]

“It’s a bit awkward to receive thanks for such a simple send-off.”

Choi Jiyeon smiled wryly.

“If you ever encounter any difficulties, don’t hesitate to come to us. Of course, you’re welcome to visit us even if you’re just bored.”

[Yes.]

[I’ll keep that in mind.]

With those words, Choi Jiyeon turned around. Her footsteps echoed as she walked away, and her figure gradually disappeared.

Hong Yeon-hwa’s gaze followed Choi Jiyeon.

Once Choi Jiyeon entered the building and the doors that had opened on either side closed, Hong Yeon-hwa finally turned her head away.

“…Ahem.”

Hong Yeon-hwa let out an awkward cough and glanced around to check her surroundings. After confirming that no one was watching, she stealthily approached me.

– Squeeze…

She stretched out her hands and pulled me into her embrace.

Even though I had grown accustomed to this sensation, the overwhelming happiness that surged through me left me feeling relaxed and content.

“So good…”

A heartfelt murmur escaped my lips. Hong Yeon-hwa smiled and gently stroked my head and back.

“…Please don’t get hurt.”

I had already told Hong Yeon-hwa that I had things to take care of during the rest of the vacation and that I’d be moving around.

Of course, I didn’t tell her the exact destination; I just mentioned that I had a place to visit.

In response, she tried to tickle the truth out of me, but I managed to keep the secret safe.

Because I didn’t tell her the destination, Hong Yeon-hwa looked down at me with a slightly anxious expression.

[Don’t worry.]

[It’s not a dangerous place.]

I shook my head, telling her not to worry.

The place I was heading wasn’t truly dangerous.

This world is divided into three major zones.

The Black Zones, consumed by monsters due to the chain reactions of countless dungeons running wild, where the land itself has been corrupted.

The White Zones, where civilization has been preserved, sometimes even better than it was before the Great Cataclysm, thanks to the influence of the World Superhuman Association.

And the Gray Zones that lie between the Black and White.

These are areas where the land hasn't been taken over by monsters, but the influence of associations and other powers doesn't reach far.

I was just going to visit one of these Gray Zones.

I planned to level up through the dungeon, collect artifacts, and take care of the fanatics who had established a base nearby.

If all that went smoothly…

'If I finish earlier than expected, I'll spend some time with Seo-yul.'

I'm still receiving updates about Seo-yul.

Elia had been sending me daily photos of Seo-yul, and they were all so adorable and precious.

By the time I realized it, I had backed up all the photos without even thinking about it.

For reference, Hong Yeon-hwa planned to meet Seo-yul during the second semester.

Since Hong Yeon-hwa couldn't afford to waste time during the vacation, meeting toward the end of the break wouldn't allow enough time.

So we decided that it would be better for Seo-yul, Hong Yeon-hwa, and I to meet in the second semester at Shio-ram.

'I'm really glad that Yeon-hwa doesn't have a bad impression of Seo-yul.'

It was such a relief that Hong Yeon-hwa didn't have any negative feelings toward Seo-yul.

When I nervously asked her what she thought of Seo-yul, the positive response she gave relieved me so much.

If she had given a negative answer… Just thinking about it is terrifying, but I would have had to apologize profusely, even if it meant getting on my knees, to avoid her wrath.

'…So if I finish early, I'll go get Seo-yul right away.'

The Gray Zones aren't always dangerous places.

Although they attract all sorts of criminals because the Association's influence and the Observatory's monitoring don't reach them frequently, it's not dangerous if you're cautious.

Of course, there's always the chance of things taking a wrong turn…

'But in that case, I have insurance, so I'll be able to escape with my life.'

I had insurance.

If it looked like I was really going to die, I could make an emergency escape.

So it's safe.

[I'll come back in one piece.]

I might get injured, but I could heal and return.

I wasn't lying.

As I said this, I smiled brightly to reassure the worried Hong Yeon-hwa, who looked at me as if I were a newborn baby placed near the water's edge.

"…Maybe I should just go with you…"

It didn't seem to work very well.

Seeing her response, I nodded reluctantly and glanced at the corner of my vision with slightly open eyes.

[…!…!……!!]

[……]

‘…Why has that thing been acting up since earlier?’

In the corner of my barely opened vision.

It looked like something written on the status window (presumably) had changed.

Of course, I couldn’t tell what it was.

* * *

[The Master of The Tower of Harmony raises both hands in the air.]

[Points are being used.]

[Oh no! What a*#&! the eye&@ have opene#!]

[Points are being used.]

[Although I ca*& understan# it, I ca% answ^ you righ& no#…]

[Points are being used.]

[You %ind the kno@ of knowl*@#. But as the restrictions of the Towe# lessen, you can& get the answ^ yo& se%&!!]

[Large amounts of points are being used.]

…

…

…

[…Salvatio%?]

[Points are being used.]

End of Chapter.

CHAPTER 144
UPROOTING (1)

—

Right after leaving the Gop-hwa Clan, I headed straight to my destination without any delay.

The destination was in what used to be China, relatively close to the Gop-hwa Clan's main house located on the Korean Peninsula.

I didn't use a Warp Gate during the journey.

After all, the land known as China is a quintessential Gray Zone.

There weren't many gates established in that region, and since I wasn't using my identity as Lee Hayul, I simply traveled there on my own.

Of course, walking there on foot would have taken some time, but given that I had my own methods, I was able to arrive quickly.

And so, I arrived in China… Where exactly is this place? Judging by the old geography, it should be somewhere between the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Liaoning Province.

I slowly scanned the surroundings using Observation.

I gradually expanded the range of my Observation, even straining a bit to do so.

A flood of information surged in. I suppressed the throbbing pain in my head and tried to organize the information momentarily.

'This place is so backward.'

The first impression that came to mind was that this place was severely underdeveloped.

I casually stirred the ground with the tip of my foot.

Dark and murky soil was unearthed from the asphalt-covered ground. Just by looking at it, the soil quality seemed poor.

The general infrastructure around here was in poor condition.

The gray concrete buildings were full of cracks, as if they could collapse at any moment.

The walls of the buildings were covered with graffiti and blackened grime, and there wasn't a single intact window to be found.

These buildings were still the better ones. On one side, shantytowns made of haphazardly assembled wood and fabric were sprawling.

The residents of these areas were far from healthy, appearing gaunt and emaciated.

This was vastly different from the facilities I had seen over the past few months.

There was no sense of peace or modern beauty that one might feel in a city.

Even Shipnaha, which was considered a small town on the outskirts, had a rough but somewhat developed appearance. In contrast, this place looked like an abandoned ruin, worse than a small town or countryside.

'They say most of China is like this.'

After the Great Cataclysm, China was one of the countries that didn't even leave a proper shell behind and perished.

The larger the territory, the more there was to protect.

China had vast lands, which meant there was a lot to defend.

Not only did they have to fend off external enemies, but they also had the burden of dealing with dungeons and monsters that emerged internally.

Because of this, after the Great Cataclysm, most of the countries with vast territories either shrank or disappeared and got divided into smaller groups.

Among them, China was in a relatively better situation.

With the emergence of superhumans, human resources became more important than anything else.

China had a large population due to its vast land, and therefore, many people awakened as superhumans.

The nature or character of those who awakened as superhumans didn't matter. Whether they were good or bad, they were human.

In the end, for survival, they had to hunt monsters and raid dungeons.

The country split into dozens of pieces, and countless people died and disappeared.

Given the large population, the number of casualties was high, but realistically speaking, it wasn't to the level of total annihilation.

In modern times, China has fallen. Most of the groups that split into dozens have also collapsed. A significant portion of the territory has become unusable land.

This was the work of a single monster.

'Twin-Headed Venom Dragon.'

Its name is Twin-Headed Venom Dragon (雙頭毒龍).

According to the Association's ranking, it was a 3rd Rank Alpha.

At the 3rd Rank level, it was impossible for even a top-tier hero to hunt it down solo.

Therefore, multiple top-tier heroes and support units had to be mobilized to conduct the hunt.

Even though it was a 3rd Rank with such a high status, there were several reasons why this single being was able to devastate the vast land of China to the point of irrecoverability.

One of the main reasons was the Twin-Headed Venom Dragon's disease and poison.

True to its name, the creature had the appearance of an Eastern dragon with two heads.

One head spewed poison, while the other breathed out plagues.

The lethality was so grotesque that whether it was poison or the breath of disease, if a top-tier hero received a direct hit, they would practically die on the spot.

The more serious issue was the terrifyingly extensive spread of that poison and disease.

The poison affected not only people but also the terrain itself. Thanks to this, the surrounding area was transformed into a death zone soaked in poison.

The disease was extremely contagious. When the Twin-Headed Venom Dragon first appeared, hundreds of thousands were massacred, and the survivors spread the disease, leading to an absurdly widespread disaster.

The Twin-Headed Venom Dragon's physical abilities were slightly below the average for a 3rd Rank, but it was specialized in inflicting harm on humans.

As a result, the vast land of China was utterly destroyed.

Even now, the central regions around Sichuan, where the Twin-Headed Venom Dragon appeared, remain poisoned and abandoned.

Due to this, much of the former Chinese territory has long become a Gray Zone where both monsters and humans coexist.

Every day, monsters appear and devour humans, and places where people live are frequented by rogue superhumans who routinely violate international law set by the Association.

Given all this, it was no wonder this place had become so rundown.

'Tsk.'

I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

Clicking my tongue for no particular reason, I moved toward a pillar installed on the roadside.

A long, gray pillar with branches extending from the top. Tangled black wires were draped over it.

'Been a while… '

It was a telephone pole.

In the previous world, such facilities were common, but in this world, they are relics of the past.

Now, instead of electricity, mana is used.

Mid-range mana supply is also done by burying cables underground.

Therefore, there's no need for facilities like telephone poles.

I tapped the telephone pole with a sense of nostalgia.

The pillar of the telephone pole, riddled with cracks, was plastered with various fliers.

Glancing over them, they advertised things like organ sales, illegal drugs, bounties, and other shady dealings.

'They're posted here too, huh.'

I ripped off one of the fliers dangling from the pole.

Among the old, torn, and weathered fliers, this one seemed relatively recent.

The content wasn't particularly unique.

Worship the god. The god will soon descend, and those who follow Him will be saved from death… Or something along those lines.

It was a lengthy, convoluted religious advertisement.

Of course, it wasn't from a legitimate religion but rather a cult that could easily be dismissed as a criminal organization.

Given that China has long become a Gray Zone, it's the perfect breeding ground for such cults to thrive, filled with people whose lives are impoverished and hopeless.

The message was essentially "Follow the god, and you'll be saved," which was hardly something a sane person would accept.

'…The god of death.'

The flyer referred to the god they worshipped as the god of death.

Praising the god of death with flowery, religious language, the flyer was covered in all sorts of ornate phrases.

On the cover was an image of a figure in a black robe holding a scythe.

I glanced at the magical inscription on the flyer and then crumpled it up and stuffed it into my pocket.

'…A giant snake isn't much of a god.'

The Master of The Tower of Necromancy.

Though I wasn't sure what had happened, there were already forces devoted to following the one who hadn't even started invading yet.

This group would later locate the corpse of the Twin-Headed Venom Dragon and revive it, causing another catastrophe in China.

This catastrophe would kill off the remaining humans, turning China from a Gray Zone into a Black Zone… a Demonic Realm.

'That can't happen.'

It's a disaster that must never occur.

The Shipnaha incident was already a significant issue, but if this disaster were to happen, the number of casualties would be on a completely different scale.

More importantly, even the Three Great Clans, which are closely tied to China, would suffer.

Baek Ahrin of the Changhae Clan and Hong Yeon-hwa of the Gop-hwa Clan would both be affected.

'I need to uproot it in advance.'

Of course, I needed to level up first.

Finding the entrance to The Lake of Mana in this vast land would be a daunting task, but with the Power of Observation, it should be done quickly.

As for the entry conditions… I could probably finesse them with the Power of Space.

While exploring the dungeon, I would also search for the cultists.

Even if I couldn't completely eradicate them this time, it was necessary to deal them some damage.

I also had a plan for an emergency escape in case things became too dangerous in the middle.

Letting out a deep sigh, I stopped walking.

Before I knew it, I was standing in front of a decrepit building.

A man with a rough appearance was sitting on a chair near the entrance.

Judging by the mana within him, he was a superhuman.

The man's gaze turned toward me as I walked up to him.

I was wearing a loose robe.

With the hood pulled up and a black mask without eyeholes covering my face, I looked suspicious.

"Outsiders are forbidden. Get lost immediately and don't meddle."

Before I could say anything, the man issued a cold order to leave.

He tapped the sword hanging at his waist with a menacing expression, seemingly ready to draw it.

Given my attire, his reaction was somewhat understandable.

'……'

"Are you deaf? Why aren't you leaving?"

Ignoring him, I used Observation once more to scan the building just in case.

The building had two floors above ground and two floors below ground.

The first floor was a spacious lobby, and the second floor had a few rooms for residence.

Despite looking like a pigsty, with no maintenance or even basic cleaning done, there wasn't anything particularly problematic.

And in the basement…

There were people locked in metal cages meant for wild beasts, and in the center of the basement, there was a priest-like figure conducting a ritual at an altar.

On the crude stone altar lay a corpse of a person with their abdomen slit open.

Blood was oozing from the corpse, filling the grooves carved into the stone altar.

The face of the corpse was grotesquely distorted, indicating that the person had been alive when their abdomen was torn open.

"Tsk, you could've just left when I told you."

The man got up from the creaky chair. Resting his hand on the hilt of his sword, he walked toward me.

"Lately, too many rats have been sniffing around."

Skrreeek…

The sword was drawn with a creaking sound. His movements were clumsy, and the sound of the sword being drawn was full of noise.

Even though there were no people around, the sight of him preparing to kill someone so openly showed just how bad the security was in this place.

With security this poor, securing sacrifices must be quite easy.

The man swung his sword at me.

Seeing that he hadn't even cloaked his sword in Qi, I lifted my foot.

– KWAANG!

My foot smashed into the center of the man's forehead.

CRUNCH! The man's head snapped back as his body was flung into the door of the building.

The wooden door collided with the man and broke off its hinges.

Even without touching it, the door swung wide open by itself.

At that moment, I casually checked the corner of my vision.

It seemed like the text on the status window (presumably) had changed again.

'…Is the Adjustment System actually working?'

My body did feel a little lighter…

Tilting my head in curiosity, I walked into the building, where dust was billowing up.

* * *

[Savior Adjustment System: Destruction Path]

[Main Quest [The Tower of Necromancy] Linked Confirmed]

[Supporting the Savior]

…

[Savior Adjustment System: Salvation Path]

[Mental State [Salvation] [Goodwill] Confirmed]

[Supporting the Savior]

End of Chapter.

CHAPTER 145
UPROOTING (2)

—

“Grrk… grrgh…!”

The culprit behind the dust cloud.

The guy who had tumbled inside the building along with the door made choking sounds as he struggled to breathe.

All his teeth were knocked out, and his already rough-looking face had become even more grotesque.

I stepped inside the building through the entrance where the door had been ripped off.

– Kwak!

At the same time, I stomped on a sword blade that flew toward my ankle with fierce momentum.

It was enveloped in Qi, and the blade had a decent amount of strength, likely infused with a fair amount of mana.

But the level was mediocre.

The blade, unable to withstand the force, snapped in half, Qi and all, and stuck into the floor.

“Huh?”

The guy who had been hiding beside the door, aiming for my ankle, stared

blankly at the broken sword.

I kicked him squarely in the face, which was positioned perfectly within reach.

A blurred trajectory struck his head.

Whack! His face sprayed blood as his head snapped back violently.

The two eyes that had been wide open went limp and unfocused.

His body, unable to withstand the force, flew through the air and crashed headfirst into the ceiling.

At that moment, three more attacks swiftly flew toward me.

A sword aiming for my neck up close, another sword thrusting toward my abdomen from the side, and a dagger sneaking in from the blind spot to stab my flank.

They weren't even worth considering as passable attacks.

The gaps in their defenses were so wide that it wasn't difficult to counter.

I swung the leg I had just used to kick the guy into the ceiling and struck the broken sword on the floor like a soccer ball.

The blade, lifted by my foot, spun rapidly.

– Kwak!

"Argh!"

The sword aiming for my neck twisted off course. The guy's wrist was pierced by the broken blade, and he let out a scream as his body crumpled to the ground.

The already large gap in their defenses widened.

I twisted my body slightly. The sword aiming for my flank couldn't even graze my robe, slicing through empty air.

To give the blade some meaning, I nudged it with my knee.

The sword wasn't well-balanced. It was easy to interfere with from the outside, and its trajectory twisted.

Thunk! The tip of the sword stabbed into the shoulder of the man holding the dagger.

While he froze in pain, I spun around and delivered a roundhouse kick to his side.

The guy gritted his teeth and enveloped his side with Qi. A dull purple Qi wrapped around his side like armor.

He was quick to assess the situation.

– Crunch!

"Urgh…!"

Unfortunately, the quality of his Qi was subpar. His mana was filthy, and his skills were disastrous.

Shards of shattered Qi scattered around. Crack! The man's waist bent at a 90-degree angle.

I didn't stop there. I put more strength into my legs and kicked the man, along with the guy who was standing dazedly beside him.

– Crash!

"Ugh…!"

The two of them tangled together and rolled across the floor.

The inside of the building, which had been noisy for a moment, fell silent.

I lowered my leg, and the dust that had risen when the door was ripped off finally began to settle.

Although, another cloud of dust rose as they tumbled across the floor.

“Why… why the sudden attack…?”

The guy who was lying on the floor—specifically, the one who had tried to stab me in the neck and then tumbled away with his companion—gritted his teeth and spoke.

“You bastard… Are you from the Golden Dragon, or are you one of the Association’s dogs—”

Wham! His mouth was shut by a kick.

I used Observation to check on the four of them lying on the floor… Oh, one of them was stuck in the ceiling.

I quickly assessed their condition.

They were still breathing. Their injuries weren’t too severe. They were merely unconscious for now.

It wasn’t that I refrained from killing them out of mercy; I still had things to interrogate them about.

If I had intended to kill them, I would have smashed their heads to pieces rather than letting them lose consciousness.

‘Their level is low.’

Perhaps because the group was small, they were barely on the edge of being low-rank heroes.

Even a cadet from the time of admission to Shio-ram could easily handle them.

It wasn't strange, though. The same methods were used in the original work.

They would extend their branches across China, capturing both monsters and humans as sacrifices to send to their main base.

Although monsters were also used as sacrifices, the primary offering was always human.

I approached one side of the building and kicked the wall hard.

The old wooden wall crumbled, revealing a path leading to the basement.

As I followed the path down, a thick iron door appeared. It wasn't in great condition, with rust and small scratches all over.

That wasn't all.

Through Observation, I could clearly see the magical inscriptions on the door. As I recognized them, I quickly deciphered the security.

'Increased durability, stealth, mana circulation cut-off… Quite complicated.'

The inscriptions were woven like a spider's web, enveloping the entire basement.

It was a magical structure aimed at achieving both secrecy and durability.

I kicked the iron door without hesitation.

– KWAANG!!

"…!"

The solid iron door was torn away violently. The door, marked with a clear indentation in the center, rolled across the floor with a loud clatter.

The guy performing the sacrificial ritual flinched and turned around.

Judging by the shock on his face, he hadn't noticed what was happening upstairs.

He had been too focused on the sacrificial ritual, and the basement itself was designed to block out all external presences.

The guy was dressed in what appeared to be a black priest's robe. On his chest was an ominous emblem of a snake coiled around a scythe.

'The Death Cult… was it?'

It was indeed a symbol of the Death Cult, a group that worshiped the god of death. The emblem was as straightforward as the group itself.

Behind him was a stone altar.

As I had observed earlier, there was a corpse lying on the altar.

The blood had apparently been drained in a short time, leaving the corpse's skin deathly pale.

The basement was quite spacious, and in the corner were several people locked in metal cages, awaiting their turn as sacrifices.

A dirty feeling welled up within me.

The guy opened his mouth. The flow of mana subtly shifted.

He was trying to buy time by talking.

"What do you think you're—"

Before he could finish his sentence, I kicked off the ground.

Victory goes to the one who acts first.

There was no reason to wait.

The basement was spacious, so there was some distance between us, but it wasn't far enough to prevent me from closing the gap instantly.

The guy's face twisted as he unleashed his mana.

It was a defensive mana emission. A black barrier spread out in front of him.

It was a rapid manifestation, as if he had pre-chanting prepared in advance.

His internal mana then shifted. It was a peculiar use of mana. At the same time, the corpse behind him twitched.

Necromancy.

The ability to manipulate the corpses and souls of the dead.

I had seen it quite a bit in the original work.

Because of that, I knew exactly why he was bothering to manipulate such a weak corpse.

Low-grade undead like that were either used as meat shields or as corpse bombs.

In most cases, manipulation-type abilities like necromancy could be countered by targeting the main body.

Therefore, to block enemies from approaching the main body, necromancers would push the undead forward, and if they couldn't use them anymore, they would quickly perform a makeshift ritual to turn them into corpse bombs.

'This bastard… '

My face twisted on its own. Mana surged from my legs, where Qi was manifesting.

The mana, surpassing my internal Qi, was released externally and became Qi.

A chilling blood-red Qi bubbled up and wrapped around my leg.

– Uwoong!

I thrust my leg toward the mana barrier blocking the front.

The blood-red Qi pierced through the barrier.

The barrier couldn't hold my leg for even a moment. My leg shot straight through and struck the guy's solar plexus.

Crunch! The sensation of bones shattering resonated clearly. With that, I drove my leg forward and pinned the guy against the wall.

"Urgh…!"

The guy let out a short gasp before his body was slammed into the wall.

Bang! The basement trembled for a moment. Dust fell from the ceiling.

The guy's body, which had been trembling against the wall, went limp and slumped to the floor.

The battle ended in a single blow.

I glanced at the corpse on the altar that had been twitching.

The twitching had stopped.

If I had left it alone, it probably would have lunged at me and exploded.

Clicking my tongue, I also checked the metal cages. About ten or so people were locked in the basement, but only a few of them were conscious.

Even those who were conscious were trembling in fear after witnessing the battle, staring at me in terror.

“Gah, grrk…! Aaagh…!”

A guy on the floor, writhing like a worm, caught my attention.

He must have been in excruciating pain from the blow to his solar plexus, as he kept coughing up blood and squirming.

Thud— When I stopped my foot right in front of his face, the squirming stopped. The guy turned his head. His face, smeared with filth and dust, twisted in rage.

“You… bastard…!”

Who was the one calling whom a bastard?

I tilted my head nonchalantly, and his already ugly face contorted even more.

“You dare— Ugh!”

Those weren’t the words I wanted to hear.

I didn’t want to waste time, either.

I roughly kicked him in the head, silencing him before he could spout any more nonsense.

‘Now then… ’

I had roughly planned what to do on my way here.

The primary goal was to locate The Lake of Mana, but along the way, I would also find and disrupt the branches of the Death Cult.

And in the process, I would deal with these bastards.

It would be nice if that were the end of it, but unfortunately, things weren’t going to be that simple.

In the process of dealing with these bastards, I would inevitably end up rescuing civilians.

If this were a White Zone like Shipnaha, I could just hand the rescued civilians over to the Association or a nearby power, but in a Gray Zone like this, there was no power to hand them over to.

'In fact, the nearby power would be these bastards.'

In the Gray Zone, monsters roamed freely, and a significant portion of the land was infested with dungeons.

The guys I just dealt with.

They may have abandoned their humanity, and their skills were abysmal, but they were still low-rank heroes.

They could probably handle the miscellaneous 8th to 7th Rank monsters that appeared around here.

In other words, in a Gray Zone like this, they were a fairly useful force.

I crouched down beside the guy writhing on the floor and grabbed him by the hair, lifting his head.

Grrk… He groaned in pain as his head was lifted. His eyes trembled and slowly opened.

He saw his reflection in my eyes.

I was wearing a robe that covered my entire body, and a strange mask without any eyeholes.

'It really does make me look suspicious.'

I entertained the thought briefly as I activated my Mana Affinity Expansion Ability.

“Wait… what are you doing…!”

Sensing something was off, he began to struggle. But there was no way he could escape.

Mana Affinity Expansion Ability.

Homogenization.

‘Illusionary Dream.’

For a moment, my mana fluctuated.

The color of the mana manifested externally was a deep violet. The eerie yet dreamy mana entered his mind through his eyes.

“Gurk, gurgle…”

The guy who had been struggling froze, then suddenly his eyes rolled back.

His mouth hung open, and drool began to drip from his slackened jaw, making him look utterly stupid.

Maxwell’s Unique Ability.

That ability line was mental manipulation, illusions.

I had observed it during our last encounter. Due to insufficient information and lack of proficiency, I could only perform basic operations.

But for a bastard like this with no mental strength, it was the perfect ability.

I didn’t need someone in their right mind.

The now idiotic bastard would give more accurate and reliable answers.

* * *

[Contact with Branch 12 near Ao Han has been lost.]

“Tsk.”

The leader of the Death Cult, Kyowon, clicked his tongue as he confirmed the message.

It was unwelcome news. It soured his mood.

China was vast. So was its population.

Even after the country was destroyed by the Twin-Headed Venom Dragon and became a Gray Zone, many people remained, and even more were born in this dire situation.

Their quality of life was abysmal, making it an ideal place to expand the cult.

When people fail to find solace in reality, the most common refuge is religion.

And so, the Death Cult had many branches spread across China. As a result, the amount of sacrifices gathered by each branch was significant.

Losing one or two wasn’t something to worry about.

Bribes had already been handed out to the local powers where each branch was established. Not only did they not interfere, but they also collaborated to gather sacrifices.

The Association didn’t matter either.

The situation in the Demonic Realm had been unstable lately.

Even the Association’s leaders were silent, and they didn’t have the resources to form a punitive force to deal with a Gray Zone, let alone a Black Zone.

But recently, branches had been falling one by one.

‘The Taesan Clan… What did they mess with to stir things up over here?’

The Taesan Clan.

Recently, members of the Taesan Clan had been causing trouble in China.

Their intent was clear. They were specifically targeting the Death Cult.

To make matters worse, even the clan’s heir was involved.

This was a troubling situation for Kyowon.

Could he just go ahead and kill them all? It wasn’t impossible.

But he wasn’t confident he could handle the aftermath.

The heir of the Taesan Clan dying suddenly in China?

The head of the Taesan Clan would immediately lead their elite forces to invade China.

If that happened, it wouldn’t just end with a few branches getting destroyed.

At such a critical time, he couldn’t afford to take such a risk.

‘I’ll have to sacrifice a few.’

There were hundreds of branches established across the vast land of China.

The concealment magic placed on each branch was also of a fairly high level.

Resources had been expended to use magic, and the branches were established in locations that were not only convenient for gathering sacrifices but also easy to hide.

Furthermore, there were still several dungeons rampaging across China.

The mana waves were so chaotic that even the best sensory abilities would

struggle to locate the branches consecutively.

Indeed, branches were currently being destroyed at a rate of one per day, but there was still plenty of time before the plan was complete.

Moreover, Kyowon was confident that they wouldn't find his main base.

Sacrificing the lesser to protect the greater.

It was a basic strategy that any thinking person would consider.

Nodding, Kyowon refocused his mind.

Kyowon's location was underground.

A massive skeletal dragon lay atop the magic circle spread out on the floor.

The skeleton was not in perfect condition.

It had two necks, but one of the skulls was missing, leaving it in an incomplete state.

Kyowon concentrated and poured sacrifices into the skeleton, drawing out the remaining traces of the soul within.

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[Contact with Branch 13 near Ao Han has been lost.]

[Contact with Branch 14 near Ao Han has been lost.]

[Contact with Branch 15 near Ao Han has been lost.]

…

“…What?”

On that same day.

Nine branches were destroyed consecutively.

[Contact with Branch 3 near Naïman has been lost.]

[Contact with Branch 4 near Naïman has been lost.]

[Contact with Branch 5 near Naïman has been lost.]

…

[Contact with Branch 2 near Wingnut has been lost.]

[Contact with Branch 3 near Wingnut has been lost.]

[Contact with Branch 5 near Wingnut has been lost.]

[Contact with Branch 6 near Wingnut has been lost.]

And the next day, thirteen branches lost contact.

Far from one per day, more than twenty branches had been destroyed in just two days.

“……”

The damage had far exceeded expectations.

In other words, it had severely disrupted the supply of sacrifices.

End of Chapter.

CHAPTER 146
UPROOTING (3)

—

It's been about a week since I arrived in China.

During that week, I wandered everywhere, searching for the branches of the Death Cult and eliminating them.

Finding them wasn't difficult.

The branches of the Death Cult were fairly well hidden.

The locations were in gray zones, where the magical fluctuations were chaotic, and the facilities themselves were well concealed.

A typical superhuman with detection abilities would have had a hard time finding them.

Of course, there was no way they could escape the Power of Observation.

Even without relying on Observation, I could roughly pinpoint their locations by tracing the remnants of mana.

I roamed around the land of China, locating the branches and launching surprise attacks.

I would beat down the bastards stationed there and rescue anyone who had been brought there as sacrifices.

That was how I spent the past week.

In that week, I cleared over 50 branches.

Considering that the original work mentioned there were hundreds of branches of the Death Cult, I had significantly eroded their numbers.

– Hoo…

A sigh filled with fatigue escaped my lips.

My body was quite tired. I hadn't slept even once during the entire week, and I barely took any breaks.

I expanded the range of my Observation while constantly running around.

When I found a branch, I would assess the facility and its power before launching an attack.

In the process, I sustained several injuries, but they were minor enough to heal quickly without the need for potions.

As soon as I finished clearing a branch and taking care of the aftermath, I would rush off to find another one.

It was an exhausting schedule, to say the least.

Both my body and mind felt the fatigue.

But it wasn't an unbearable schedule.

Even though I was tired, my strength hadn't diminished.

I could maintain this pace for at least another month.

"Grrk…"

At that moment, as I was letting out a series of sighs, my body suddenly jolted up and down.

A groan of pain also echoed from below.

I tapped the person I was sitting on.

It was a large man whose limbs were bent in bizarre directions, and whose entire body was covered in wounds.

He was the guy I had knocked down earlier.

Around me lay several others in similar conditions.

There were about twenty of them in total.

'This was a pretty sizable branch.'

The strength of the branches varied.

Some were as weak as the first branch I attacked, which I could clear without much effort.

But the larger branches required me to be on high alert during the assault.

This one was quite a sizable branch.

I dusted off my pants as I stood up and kicked the man lying on the ground, flipping him over.

Squawk! The man, who made a sound like a frog, flipped over to reveal a necklace around his neck.

It was an honorary necklace awarded by the Association to high-ranking heroes.

'An ex-high-ranking hero, huh… '

Judging by the age of the necklace, it had been awarded at least 20 years ago.

A high-ranking hero.

That's not a position one gets through sheer luck.

He was likely a hero who took great pride in his skills during his active years.

Of course, now he was nothing more than a weakened thug.

'Ugh… '

My body, which had been heated from the battle, began to calm down.

I started by cleaning up the area and freeing the people who were trapped underground.

They were also locked up in iron cages.

Given that they were the same cult, most of the sacrificial rituals took place in similar facilities.

"Th-thank you…! Thank you so much…!"

This was one of the larger branches. As a result, there were many civilians captured to be used as sacrifices.

Most of them, upon being freed from their iron cages, wept with relief, expressing their gratitude for having their lives spared.

Their appearances were truly pitiful.

Their clothes were nothing more than rags, and they were so emaciated that their bones protruded visibly.

Those living outside weren't in great condition either, but those who had been captured and kept here had clearly suffered greatly.

'…'

Feeling a mix of emotions, I took out some soup from my subspace pocket, heated it up, and distributed it among them.

While there were emergency rations like bread, jerky, and energy bars, they

weren't the kind of food they could comfortably consume at the moment.

These people, who had just been freed from captivity, swallowed their saliva greedily while I heated the soup.

As soon as they received the soup, they devoured it hungrily.

I had suspected this might happen, so I deliberately heated the soup to a moderate temperature.

Initially, I heated it until steam rose from the pot, but after seeing them burn their mouths while trying to gulp it down, I changed the temperature.

After ensuring they had eaten just enough to avoid starvation,

I planned to send those who had places to return to back to their homes and take appropriate measures for those who didn't.

Then, I would resume my search for more branches of the Death Cult.

'…It's just self-satisfaction… '

My mind felt needlessly troubled.

I sighed deeply and shook my head.

In the process of dealing with the Death Cult, I was continuously rescuing people as well.

It was only natural.

The Death Cult was using humans as sacrifices for their rituals.

So, in the process of exterminating the Death Cult, it was inevitable that I would end up rescuing those who were about to be sacrificed.

'This should hinder them quite a bit.'

The Death Cult couldn't aggressively secure sacrifices.

More precisely, they couldn't blatantly kidnap people and offer them as sacrifices.

If they did so openly, even the Association, which usually refrained from direct intervention, would have no choice but to send in a punitive force.

If that happened, their entire plan would collapse.

That's why they were operating in secrecy, gathering sacrifices gradually in hidden underground facilities.

In the midst of this, someone like me had come out of nowhere, somehow finding their locations and destroying their branches in an instant.

By now, the leader of the cult must have been steaming with rage to the point of his head spinning.

'The timing was perfect.'

In the original work, now was the best time to come in, stir things up, and leave.

The player wasn't yet strong enough to defeat the leader, but it was the perfect time to throw a wrench into their plans.

If I caused enough chaos and destroyed several branches now, the Death Cult's plans would be delayed by at least a year.

By that time, I could make an official visit to China through external activities at Shio-ram and kill the leader.

Of course, there were iterations where the plan didn't go smoothly.

Sometimes, the leader, driven mad with rage, would hunt down the player directly.

‘Hmm… ’

I briefly recalled memories to gauge the power of the Death Cult’s leader.

The leader of the Death Cult had a unique ability related to necromancy.

Moreover, he had already secured a considerable army of the dead, making him a formidable opponent.

Even the army itself was a significant challenge for the player at this point in time.

Somehow pushing through the army and directly confronting the leader would be tough, as the leader himself was a highly skilled combatant.

At this point, the only player who could easily defeat the leader was the Diamond Warrior from the 11th iteration.

‘Can I face him as I am now?’

Currently, I’m hiding my identity and concealing my strength.

I’m primarily using my legs to conceal my missing arm, and I’ve sealed my spirit arts, which are easy to identify due to their rarity.

I’m also using magic sparingly, and I’ve deliberately changed the color of my Qi to a blood-red hue.

If I were to face the leader directly…

It wouldn’t necessarily be a disadvantageous battlefield.

The fact that the leader came to me would mean he had abandoned the advantages he held at his headquarters.

Of course, the situation would change if he brought his necromancers along…

'…I won't be overwhelmed.'

At the very least, I wouldn't die without putting up a fight.

Since the leader hadn't yet resurrected the Twin-Headed Venom Dragon, there was no reason for me to be instantly killed.

If I were pushed to the brink, I could use alternative measures to fight, and if it seemed like I was truly going to die, I could escape using an emergency exit.

Whether the leader comes to me or not,

It doesn't matter either way.

My only goal is to disrupt their plans, gain plenty of combat experience, and leave.

I've also gained some experience against necromancy, even though it wasn't particularly pleasant.

After that, I'll head to The Lake of Mana, absorb its power, obtain the Proof of Protection, and return.

'Besides, the Taesan Clan is also causing chaos.'

Even though it's a gray zone, it's still a place where people live.

As such, there's still some information floating around.

Among the news, I've heard that members of the Taesan Clan are roaming around China, targeting cults and other forces.

What's more, I heard that Choi Jiyeon, the heir of the Taesan Clan, has personally come in to lead the operations.

This never happened in the original work.

I don’t know the reason, but among the forces that the Taesan Clan is targeting, the Death Cult is included.

On one side, there’s me, an unknown troublemaker, blowing up their branches.

On the other side, there’s the massive Taesan Clan stirring up trouble in their territory.

The Death Cult must be losing their minds by now.

– Tug…

“Huh?”

Just then, a child came up to me and tugged on the hem of my robe.

Green eyes and disheveled dark brown hair.

Even though they were wearing ragged clothes, their distinct facial features stood out.

They were about elementary school age, and they were the child who was almost used as a sacrifice earlier.

I had saved them just in the nick of time.

If I had been just a few minutes late, they wouldn’t have been in this world anymore.

As I turned my head towards the child, who was tugging on my robe, they held up an empty plate.

It was the plate that had held soup earlier, but now it was clean, without a single stain.

“…Could I have a little more?”

Grrr…

No sooner had the child finished speaking than their stomach growled.

Even though they had emptied the plate in one go, they were still hungry.

‘It’s understandable.’

They’re at an age where they should be eating a lot, and who knows how many days they had been held in that place.

– Nod.

I silently nodded and refilled the plate with soup.

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The next day,

A peculiar scene appeared in one part of my Observation range.

It was the entrance of a cave, where dungeon walls were intertwined and tangled intricately.

And as if to hide these walls, a dreamy mist clung to the space.

I had finally found The Lake of Mana.

* * *

“This is Team 1. Communication is clear, no issues. All teams, report in.”

Choi Jiyeon tapped her smartwatch. Her voice was transmitted to the other teams through the device.

[Team 2, communication is clear, no issues.]

[Team 3, communication is clear, no issues.]

“Report received. If any anomalies occur, report immediately.”

Prompt and clear replies followed.

Choi Jiyeon’s expression darkened.

There were no casualties.

That was a great relief, but there were no results either.

She had held out some hope, but the response she wanted didn’t come.

“Sigh…”

After finishing her report and disconnecting the mic, Choi Jiyeon let out a deep sigh.

As she tilted her head back in frustration, the gloomy sky filled her vision.

Dark clouds loomed, blocking out the sunlight.

This was already a poorly maintained area.

And with the weather as bad as this, it really felt like a wasteland.

Even though it was still a place where people lived.

She let out another sigh as she received wary and fearful glances from the locals, who were clearly uneasy about her presence.

‘Where the hell are they… ’

About fourteen days ago, a child from the Taesan Clan went missing.

The child was from a prestigious branch family, and their last known location was somewhere in this area.

On the very day they went missing, a rescue team was dispatched.

Among that rescue team was Choi Jiyeon, the clan's heir.

As the heir, she was given the responsibility of leading the first search team, and it had been over ten days since she started combing through this wretched land of China.

During that time, she hadn't stopped searching, but no traces had been found.

'It's too vast… '

More than ten days had passed.

If the cause was someone or some specific group's malicious kidnapping… it would be increasingly unlikely that the child was still alive.

But even so, they couldn't just stop searching after a mere ten days.

Moreover, if the child was already dead, it was necessary to find out who was behind it and bring them to justice.

'What a way to spend my vacation… '

"Break's over, resume the search."

After her brief rest, Choi Jiyeon declared the search would resume and snapped her fingers.

– Snap!

A sharp sound echoed around her.

As the echo faded, Choi Jiyeon's mana surged, expanding in size before

breaking off into dozens of pieces from the surface.

– Woo-woo-woo…

From those dozens of mana fragments came a sound like the wailing of sad ghosts.

The fragments then swelled like sponges soaked in water, growing to the size of a human head.

They resembled dark will-o'-the-wisps, made of shadows.

This was the most basic necromancy, manipulated through her Unique Ability, Taesan.

"Begin the search."

At her command, the dozens of spirits scattered in all directions.

End of Chapter.

CHAPTER 147
THE LAKE OF MANA

—

‘Finally found it… ’

It must have been at least ten days since I arrived in China.

At last, I discovered the Lake of Mana that I had been desperately searching for.

‘The location… it’s more conspicuous than I thought.’

I let out a long sigh of relief and observed my surroundings.

The dungeon was located midway up a cliff that was nearly perpendicular.

A hole was carved into the middle of the cliff like a cave, and when I ventured inside, the mist was so thick that it was impossible to see ahead with the naked eye.

I casually raised my hand and waved it through the mist. The ethereal mist scattered in different directions in response to my gesture.

‘Oh… ’

A cool and clear sensation was transmitted through my skin. The feeling was akin to dipping my hand into ice water, making my body shiver.

I decided to step into the mist.

The mist enveloped my body, and the sensation that had been limited to my arms spread throughout my entire body.

Breathing became easier, and my chest felt as if it had been cleared, as if a weight had been lifted.

A smile naturally formed on my lips as the fatigue of the past few days seemed to dissipate.

'The purity of the mana is high.'

This mist was composed of mana.

Not just any mana, but mana of an exceptionally high purity.

The difference in purity was akin to comparing pure water to dirty, tainted water.

The mist was seeping out from deeper within the cave.

As I ventured further inside, the mist grew even denser.

At some point, I stopped walking.

I extended my hand and tapped the air, feeling a solid, transparent wall.

It was the dungeon's barrier, designed to prevent external intrusion.

'I'm lucky. At least I've found it… '

Unconsciously, I let out a deep sigh of relief.

China is frustratingly vast.

Finding the entrance to a single dungeon in this vast land is no easy task.

Even with the Power of Observation, I wasn't entirely confident I could locate it over the break. There was a part of me that was a little anxious.

I wasn't just wandering around measuring the location non-stop; I also took a lot of detours in the middle.

Dealing with the Death Cult and other minor threats, handling neglected monsters, and carrying out various simple rescue operations…

To do all that, I alternated between areas where monsters roamed freely and areas where humans resided.

My route became several times longer than it should have been. To be honest, I was a bit worried that it would take too long.

I also had concerns that, just like in Shipnaha last time, I would come up empty-handed. But fortunately, I found it earlier than expected.

'I'm lucky.'

At last, I could say that.

I let out a soft chuckle and tapped the barrier.

If only it had gone like this in Shipnaha too…

To be honest, I had no luck in Shipnaha. It wasn't just a matter of bad luck; it was a journey filled with outright misfortune.

Nothing went smoothly, and I was even struck by a strange calamity that nearly took me to the brink of death.

It was as if the world itself hated me.

'But there's no point in regretting it now.'

Of course, there was nothing to be gained by venting frustration now. If anything, I should be grateful that I found this place so easily this time and perhaps bow in thanks to the heavens.

With such idle thoughts, I continued to tap on the barrier.

A dungeon is essentially a subspace separated from the Earth, and the line

that divides the dungeon from the Earth is this barrier.

Also, between these barriers… in other words, there's a dungeon entrance that allows entry.

Usually, the entrance appears as a vortex. It's similar to the gates found at a Gate Terminal.

If you throw yourself into that vortex, you'll pass through a winding path and cross the barrier to the other side.

What I'm tapping on right now isn't the entrance, but the barrier.

There's no visible vortex, only a transparent barrier blocking my view of the interior.

But strictly speaking, this is still the entrance.

'The Lake of Mana's entrance is notoriously tricky.'

Dungeons come in various types, and the Lake of Mana is one that has particularly stringent entry conditions.

Somewhere in this vast land of China, there are entrances that lead to the Lake of Mana.

According to the original work, there should be a couple of such entrances, but even if you find one, most of them are closed.

These entrances open randomly depending on the timing.

You might find one after much difficulty, only to discover it's closed, or it could be open.

The original work hinted at this, but it never provided a clear set of conditions. The entrances open and close at their own whim.

No special preparations are needed either.

It's pretty much just luck.

So if you really want to enter, you either have to camp out at the entrance and wait for it to open or break through the barrier to get in.

'But if you break it, the mana will scatter.'

The value of the Lake of Mana lies in one thing.

The lake is filled with highly pure mana, making it an ideal place to increase your Mana stat.

But if you break the barrier, the pure mana inside will mix with the impure mana outside.

For that reason, to enter the Lake of Mana, you either have to kill time waiting for the entrance to open or rely on luck.

Of course…

'I'm different now.'

I focused my mind.

I placed my hand on the barrier, sensing the feeling at my fingertips.

A dungeon exists within the Earth, yet it is separated as a subspace.

The barrier is the wall that divides this space.

'Manifest, Power of Space.'

If it's space, I can interfere with it.

– Wooooong…

My arm vibrated.

At that point, the surrounding space began to shake.

It was as if ripples were spreading out after a stone had been tossed into a calm lake.

‘There’s no need to break it. No need to forcefully tear it apart.’

It’s not about destruction or division.

Just a small adjustment.

The barrier that blocks external entities should be temporarily altered to allow something through.

The dungeon’s barrier.

I made a slight adjustment to the barrier in front of me.

The sensation at my palm changed. The once solid barrier gradually softened, almost turning into a slime-like consistency.

– Swoooooosh…

The hand I had placed on the barrier began to sink into it.

‘Got it.’

Success. It didn’t even consume much mental energy. I slowly squeezed my way through the softened barrier.

In the end, the barrier rippled and swallowed my entire body.

A sense of vastness, unique to crossing through space, enveloped me.

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– Swooooooosh…

As the vast sensation subsided, the sound of a waterfall filled my ears. The sound was so refreshing that it felt as though my mind was being cleansed.

My senses returned.

I calmly extended my Observation, gathering information from the surroundings.

‘Oh… ’

Observation gathered all the surrounding information.

And I couldn’t help but gape in awe.

True to the dungeon’s name, there was a lake right nearby.

Next to the lake was a gentle waterfall cascading like a stream.

The water of the lake sparkled as if it were sprinkled with stardust, and vibrant yellow leaves floated on its surface.

Encircling the lake was a lush green lawn.

Gray, sizable rocks were scattered across the lawn.

There were trees with yellow leaves, their trunks growing crookedly and bending in various directions.

Mist, seemingly originating from the waterfall, spread throughout the dungeon, centered around the lake…

The word “spectacle” came to mind naturally.

I had seen many ethereal places before, but I had never encountered a place as overtly fantastical as this one.

It was like a scene from a painting.

It felt like one of those mystical lake illustrations you might find online.

It was that beautiful.

'Hmm… '

As if drawn to it, I approached the lake.

As I got closer, gentle waves lapped at the edge of the lake like a tide.

I removed the mask covering my face.

Immediately, a cool breeze swept across my face.

– Hoooo…

Breathing felt comfortable. It was incomparable to the feeling I had at the dungeon entrance earlier.

The air was sweet. While I couldn't actually taste anything sweet, the air was so clear that it felt like it, and the purity of the mana was beyond imagination.

'I've made it inside.'

There was no doubt about it.

This was indeed the Lake of Mana.

'No monsters… '

Just to be sure, I thoroughly scanned my surroundings. I wondered if there were hidden dangers behind the beauty, but fortunately, there were no

monsters.

Similarly, there were no traps. Confirming this, I opened the entrance to my subspace.

‘Come out.’

The space behind me cracked open.

From the rift, spirits of five different colors burst forth energetically.

They were the lower spirits I had contracted with. Since I had made contracts with all five elements, the colors were uniformly distributed.

Though their consciousness wasn’t fully developed yet due to their low rank, they seemed to like this space, as they trembled with excitement and dispersed in all directions.

Spirits also have a fondness for pure mana.

However, a few orbs of light lingered near me instead of spreading out.

‘It’s okay. You can go play too.’

– Wooooong…

After I stroked the orbs of light attached to my body a few times, they finally seemed satisfied and followed the other spirits that had already left.

For orbs of light, they had a surprisingly cute side.

I let out a soft chuckle and took a moment to survey the lake.

True to its name, the water of the Lake of Mana was indeed the essence of this dungeon’s existence.

The lake water, brimming with incredibly pure mana.

Given how high the purity of the mana was, this lake was an essential environment for someone like me, who faced many challenges in increasing mana capacity.

'…It should be fine.'

Even after thoroughly checking it, there were no signs of traps.

There wouldn't be any sudden blades shooting up to skewer my body.

Nodding in assurance, I took off the robe I had been wearing.

I also removed the equipment worn beneath the black robe and the various subspace pouches attached to my belt, placing them on a rock near the lake.

I took off the arm sleeve that covered my right arm. Though exposing the burn marks made me uncomfortable, it was necessary to properly absorb the mana.

However, I kept the Wings of the Sky on.

The Wings of the Sky is an artifact that performs better the more pure mana it absorbs.

It couldn't match my mana, but since it could hold a large capacity, there was no harm in letting it absorb as much as possible.

For some reason, the Wings of the Sky kept transforming into a wing-like garment that clung to me, but I went ahead and walked forward with it on.

As I removed all my clothes, the mist seemed to lightly brush against my body.

'It's a relief that the air is relatively warm.'

I let out a sigh of relief and cautiously dipped my toes into the lake.

Ripples spread out from the point where my toes touched the lake. The yellow leaves floating on the water gently bobbed along with the ripples.

Fortunately, the lake water was lukewarm.

And the pure mana began to seep into my body through my skin.

'Ah… '

Suddenly, my body shuddered.

A warm and cool energy seemed to permeate my body through my skin.

Even as I trembled from the strange sensation, I kept walking and submerging myself in the lake.

The lake was quite deep. As a result, sitting down brought the water up to my head, leaving only my head poking out above the surface.

With my body submerged in the lake and my head enveloped in mist, I must have looked quite comical.

– Phew…

In that state, I took a deep breath in and out. The cool air filled my lungs, accompanied by pure mana.

Mana was being continuously absorbed through the lake water that enveloped my body.

'Mana Affinity.'

I pulled in even more mana.

I don't have the luxury of time.

Rather than being satisfied with natural absorption, I used my Unique Ability to draw in and absorb even more mana.

The absorbed mana traveled through my circuits and reached the core.

Thump, thump, the core pulsed. As the core expanded with each pulse, a smile naturally formed on my face.

For the first time in a while, the core, which hadn't increased in capacity much recently, showed signs of growth.

'I should stay here and increase my capacity for a few days.'

While I do plan to visit again later, I might as well make the most of it since I'm here.

'The Proof of Protection… It should appear after a few days. I'll stay until then.'

With that thought in mind, I sharpened my focus once more and continued to draw in mana.

Ripples formed around me.

My body felt a bit ticklish.

* * *

'…Should I postpone the plan?'

Kyowon, the leader of the Death Cult, gritted his teeth as he confirmed that communication had been lost one after another.

Branches that had been scattered throughout China to supply sacrifices were being destroyed at an alarming rate.

How many branches have collapsed just in the past week? Nearly a hundred have been wiped out.

The supply of sacrifices was disrupted. At this rate, the ritual for the soul of

the Twin-Headed Venom Dragon cannot be conducted properly.

The culprit was clear.

The forces of Taesan, who had suddenly invaded this land, were destroying various criminal organizations.

And in the process, the branches of the Death Cult were also being destroyed.

To be precise, they were being destroyed by several different forces.

Among them, one particular individual was going berserk, destroying branch after branch.

Just the branches destroyed by that one person alone accounted for half of the total branches that had been wiped out so far.

'Our location has been exposed. Some bastard…!'

There was some uncertainty. No matter how deeply one was involved in the organization, there shouldn't be anyone who knows the location of so many branches.

But that wasn't important right now.

The reason Kyowon was gritting his teeth was that the plan he had been preparing for over ten years was now in danger of being delayed.

With the supply of sacrifices interrupted, the soul ritual for the Twin-Headed Venom Dragon could not proceed.

Should he mobilize the remaining branches to aggressively secure more sacrifices?

No, if they did that, they would again be detected by the Association.

Last time, they barely managed to escape. If they were caught again, the

Association's bloodhounds would never let go this time, using the previous information as a lead.

'Damn it… '

Kyowon ground his teeth. Again. Last time, the Association had invaded, and now Taesan's madmen were barging in, disrupting his plans.

This reality was infuriating. Though he was boiling with rage, the situation was grim.

All Kyowon could do was give up what had to be given up, hold on to what he couldn't afford to lose, and bide his time.

'…Yes, I've already waited for over ten years.'

What harm would there be in waiting a few more years? If he hunkered down for a few more years, they would eventually tire out and leave.

Then he could resume his plan.

Kyowon made up his mind.

—Proceed with the ritual.

"……!"

At that moment, Kyowon's eyes widened as a will struck directly into his soul. Without hesitation, he knelt and pressed his forehead to the ground.

– Thud!

"S-Sir, my god…!"

His voice trembled with awe and reverence. He closed his eyes and pressed his head against the earth.

Even so, Kyowon could feel the gaze upon him.

A vast, overwhelming eye, as if it could cover the heavens.

An eye with a yellow iris and a vertically slit pupil.

The difference in magnitude felt from that gaze was indescribable.

“I shall carry out the ritual…!”

If he conducted the ritual now, it would be dangerous. They would expose their trail to the Association, and in the midst of Taesan’s ongoing assault, they would end up sacrificing crucial assets.

It didn’t matter. This was a command from the god he worshipped. Even if it meant sacrificing crucial assets, it didn’t matter. Moreover, his god had plans that were beyond his comprehension.

Kyowon, pressing his head against the ground, shed tears as he once again realized the divine majesty of his god.

–……

That devoted sight was met with a dispassionate gaze from the massive eye.

It was as if it was looking at something utterly worthless.

Eventually, the eye shifted its gaze slightly, meeting the eyes of others at a similar height who were glaring back.

Eyes filled with blatant hostility.

No action was taken.

It was as if they were like caged beasts, baring their fangs but unable to act.

But the same was true for this side.

The constraints had not yet been lifted.

That would be resolved soon enough, but for now, it was not the time.

The eye closed.

End of Chapter.

CHAPTER 148
THE HANDSOME MAN AND THE WOODCUTTER (1)

Choi Jiyeon was quite skeptical about this current search operation.

It wasn't because she wished ill on the missing child or hoped the child was dead.

She just thought the chances of survival didn't seem high, from a realistic point of view.

[Team 2, signal received clearly. Target found.]

"Hmm?"

[Additionally, survival confirmed. Sharing coordinates now.]

Contrary to her thoughts, the location was identified.

And very quickly at that.

Choi Jiyeon's eyes blinked in surprise as she read the unexpected report on her smartwatch.

* * *

"The Association Branch?"

The coordinates led them to a modestly set-up Association branch.

The World Superhuman Association had branches scattered all over the globe, even some located within gray zones.

Of course, the influence in these gray zones was minimal, so unlike the white zones, the branches here were much smaller and fewer in number.

Though this one stood out among the decaying buildings around it.

“This way, ma’am.”

It was at a spot slightly away from the Association building.

The leader of Team 2 spotted Choi Jiyeon and waved her over.

Beside him was a child, cloaked in an oversized robe, sipping on some soup.

It was the missing child. Exactly like the picture she had received beforehand. The child looked a little thinner, but there didn’t seem to be any visible injuries.

Feeling some relief, Choi Jiyeon approached them.

“What’s the child’s condition?”

“Fortunately, no significant injuries. There are signs of malnutrition, but nothing too severe.”

“Did you check for curses or black magic?”

“Yes, we conducted a thorough scan, and no curses were detected.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

Choi Jiyeon finally let out a deep sigh of relief, feeling the tension she had been holding onto slowly release.

Seeing the child gulp down the soup without a care in the world further assured her.

They had been quite lucky, it seemed.

“However, we did detect some defensive magic.”

“…Defensive magic?”

“Yes. We analyzed it briefly, but there’s nothing harmful, so we’ve left it intact for now.”

Choi Jiyeon, who had just begun to relax, felt herself tense up again.

‘Not a curse or black magic, but protection?’

Narrowing her eyes, Choi Jiyeon cast another glance at the child.

She took a closer look at the robe the child was wearing.

She had assumed it was something handed over by the leader of Team 2, but now that she looked closely, it seemed quite different.

Most notably, the robe was inscribed with a magical formula that she hadn’t noticed before.

It was high-level stuff. Even though Choi Jiyeon wasn’t particularly skilled in magic, she could recognize its complexity at a glance.

While she wasn’t adept at casting magic, dismantling and breaking spells was something Choi Jiyeon excelled at.

And from her perspective, this magic wasn’t easy to break.

Even before it was activated, its formula was intricately woven, making it difficult to dissolve. And once activated, dismantling the protective spell would be even harder.

It was high-caliber magic. Moreover, it wasn’t something that matched the spell structure of the leader of Team 2.

‘…Hmm?’

As she examined the magic formula, a sense of familiarity washed over her.

To be precise, it was more of a déjà vu.

‘I’ve seen this somewhere before.’

The base formula was constructed in a textbook manner. It was as if someone had used a ruler to draw precise lines and a calculator to derive the exact values.

Choi Jiyeon’s eyes narrowed further.

She couldn’t pinpoint the exact origin since she wasn’t particularly skilled in magic.

Magic was inherently a complex discipline, and many formulas were constructed with such precision that they often looked alike, adding to the confusion.

“What is this?”

“I’ll explain, ma’am.”

The leader of Team 2, after briefly examining the spell, nodded at her request for an explanation.

The explanation didn’t last long.

The leader was as succinct in his explanation as his stoic appearance suggested.

‘Mumyeon?’

Upon hearing the explanation, Choi Jiyeon’s expression grew complicated.

Mumyeon.

It wasn’t an unfamiliar name.

Recently, it had been frequently mentioned in various reports she'd come across.

He was an individual who began his activity almost simultaneously with her own operations in China.

In just one night, he had wiped out dozens of inhumane criminal organizations and was indiscriminately hunting down monsters that had been left unchecked near civilian areas.

Even now, there were numerous witness accounts being reported, describing his peculiar appearance, leading to the nickname 'Mumyeon.'

He was said to wear a pitch-black mask that covered everything, including his eyes and mouth, and a loose, oversized robe that concealed every inch of his skin.

Moreover, some speculated that he used an enchantment for cognitive interference, leaving no trace of his identity behind.

According to the leader of Team 2, this child had already been rescued by Mumyeon and left in the care of the Association branch before they could even initiate their operation.

Apparently, the child had been captured by a cultist and was rescued by Mumyeon, who then entrusted the child to the Association.

Choi Jiyeon cast a glance at the small building of the Association branch.

It wasn't exactly located in a prime area, so the surroundings were rather bleak, yet the building was surprisingly crowded with people.

Their common trait was that they all seemed to be in poor condition, with some looking so emaciated it was painful to see.

These were the civilians Mumyeon had rescued.

“If Mumyeon’s affiliated with the Association, we should prepare some form of gratitude when we return.”

Choi Jiyeon shook her head and walked over to Team Leaders 1 and 2.

“There’s no need to waste time. Let’s return immediately. What do you think?”

“I agree.”

“Yes, I agree. I can’t wait to soak in some warm water.”

“Then let’s not delay and head out.”

With unanimous agreement from the three team leaders, their return was decided.

* * *

Unfortunately, the Association branch that was housing the child didn’t have a Gate Terminal.

The branch was small to begin with, and Gate Terminals were rarely installed in gray zones.

So, they planned to return to the nearest Gate Terminal, the same one Choi Jiyeon had used when entering China.

It was a path they had traveled for over ten days to get through.

It was a bit far.

However, since they wouldn’t be conducting any searches this time and would just be cutting straight through, the return trip should be significantly faster.

“Looks like the rumor about Mumyeon being from the Association is true.”

As night fell and darkness settled in, a chin rested on Choi Jiyeon's shoulder.

It was Lee Da-hee, one of the female team members of Team 1, which Choi Jiyeon was leading.

"There's no solid confirmation yet."

"Still, we've pretty much got our answer, don't we? The fact that the Association accepted the civilians he rescued is telling enough. Lately, they haven't even been helping civilians in the gray zones due to lack of resources."

The Association had become rather passive in providing aid to the gray zones.

In the past, they were somewhat proactive, but with the situation becoming increasingly dire in the African Demonic Realm, their resources had been diverted there.

And yet, the civilians Mumyeon had rescued were being taken care of well by the Association.

"Given how carefully he's hiding his identity, don't you think he might be from the Executive Branch?"

"They've been swamped with work due to the Demonic Realm lately. Why would they come all the way here?"

"Maybe he pissed off someone important in the Association. Our boy got involved too, didn't he? He probably stepped on the wrong toes, got assigned to this mission, and now he's being punished."

A team member from Team 3, who had been listening quietly, responded with a dismissive tone.

On their way back, the team members were all chatting about Mumyeon.

Since they had found their target without any issues and were on their way back, the atmosphere had loosened up considerably.

Given that the mission wasn't officially over yet, it wasn't the best behavior.

Choi Jiyeon considered rebuking them, but after confirming that they were keeping their sentries up and watching all directions, she decided to let it slide.

Similarly, she had also deployed her own sentries.

These were low-level spirits extracted from random monsters, scattered around to serve as sentries.

'Hmm?'

It was then that she noticed something unusual.

One of the spirits she had deployed was showing a strange sight.

When she synchronized her vision with the spirit, she saw a massive gorge, so deep it was impossible to gauge its depth.

But the strange part was something else.

'Fog?'

One side of the gorge was covered in dense fog.

The fog wasn't rising from below; it seemed to be forming spontaneously in midair.

There was something mystical about the fog.

Even for Choi Jiyeon, who had grown up seeing all sorts of natural wonders within the Taesan Clan's territory, the fog felt oddly dreamlike.

'What is that? A dungeon?'

In this world, if something in the environment seemed off, nine times out of ten, it was because of a dungeon.

Following that logic, the fog was likely the result of a dungeon.

Out of curiosity, Choi Jiyeon tried to send her spirit deeper into the gorge.

– Halt.

She didn't send it.

A closer spirit had suddenly vanished in an instant.

Choi Jiyeon's expression turned serious as she shifted her gaze.

Her team members, sensing the change in atmosphere, also turned to look in the same direction.

– Ooooo…

A chilling cry echoed as it pierced through the barren tree trunks.

Something was approaching.

It wasn't just a physical presence.

Choi Jiyeon could sense the presence of spirits filled with resentment and malice approaching them.

As a manifestation of Taesan's power, Choi Jiyeon could perceive these things with greater clarity.

Drawing in her mana, she spoke.

"…Whoever's playing around. If you come out now, I'll let it go with just one swing of my axe."

"We know how to draw a line between business and personal matters."

One of the team members, who was also scanning the surroundings with a stern face, replied.

Choi Jiyeon let out a sigh at the answer she had been hoping not to hear.

The presence was growing stronger.

It wasn't coming from just one direction. It was closing in from all sides.

"Ah, damn."

Choi Jiyeon muttered just as the spirits revealed themselves.

– Thud.

A cold, pale hand gripped a tree trunk. The hand, belonging to a body that had clearly been severely damaged, crushed the bark of the tree.

'Corpse puppets.'

Necromancy—manipulating corpses by infusing them with extracted spirits.

And there were quite a few of them.

Choi Jiyeon's eyes darted left and right as she assessed their numbers.

There were a lot of them.

While she could summon a significant number of spirits herself, the horde currently surrounding them was even larger.

Moreover, the quality of the puppets seemed decent. There were some low-level monster and human corpses, but many of them appeared to be of higher rank.

But it wasn't to the point where they would be overwhelmed.

"Prioritize protecting the child. Probe the perimeter, and break through

slowly."

She wasn't sure if the warning signals had been received properly due to the turbulent mana in the area, but she had sent them out just in case.

As she issued the orders, Choi Jiyeon stomped her foot into the ground.

– Boom!

The earth beneath them trembled.

Like ripples spreading out on a lake's surface, the tremors extended in all directions.

And then—

– Crack!

– Gaaaaah!

From beneath the spirits' feet, who had been closing in on the group, spikes of rock shot up, impaling them and tearing them apart in an instant.

Even the higher-level monsters among them stood no chance against the spikes bolstered by Choi Jiyeon's mastery over the earth and mana.

The tremors continued as clumps of dirt began to rise and crawl up her legs.

In no time, her body was encased in a thick layer of dirt, forming a solid armor around her.

The earth underfoot didn't cease its movements.

Waves of tremors followed one after another, causing spikes to surge from the ground, while the earth rippled like waves, crushing the enemies beneath it.

From the cracks in the ground, various spirits climbed out.

Taesan.

Her Unique Ability allowed her to manipulate life-filled earth and the wandering spirits in the world.

As a result, the spirits caught in the malice of the earth were shattered to pieces without any resistance.

The spirits forming the siege were swiftly wiped out.

With the area now cleared, spirits summoned by Choi Jiyeon and her group filled the empty space, pushing the enemies back.

As Choi Jiyeon stretched out her hand, the ground trembled once more, and a massive double-headed axe was formed.

Gripping the freshly created axe tightly, she raised it high above her head.

The friction between her hands and the axe's handle produced a chilling screech. The veins on the back of her hand bulged beneath her armor.

Then, she swung the axe down with all her might.

One side of the axe cleaved through the air, slashing through a corpse puppet's head.

Boom! The puppet's head exploded into fragments.

Without stopping, the axe continued its descent, slicing the puppet from the top of its torso all the way down to its groin, splitting it in two before burying itself in the ground.

– Kwang!

The impact caused the ground to quake beneath her feet.

The earth cracked open, and a shockwave rippled outward along the path of

the axe.

Several more corpse puppets exploded into pieces, while even more were sent tumbling across the ground with their limbs shattered.

'Hmm… '

Choi Jiyeon frowned at the odd sensation she felt.

The enemy had launched the attack first.

They must have known who they were targeting and had prepared accordingly, but they were collapsing far too easily.

Were they just testing the waters? Sending scouts to gauge their strength? Or were they holding back, worried that their main force might be discovered?

Even so, the forces they had deployed weren't small. It wasn't a negligible effort, yet their command structure seemed nonexistent.

It was as if they were just throwing away their troops.

– Rumble!

It was then.

A chilling tremor that penetrated through her armor and rattled her bones caused Choi Jiyeon to freeze in her tracks.

A sense of foreboding. Her instincts screamed a warning.

Choi Jiyeon's face twisted into a scowl as she turned her gaze toward the source of the tremor.

– Rumble…

The ground split open.

From the widening chasm, something massive emerged, lifting a mound of earth as it rose.

As the enormous body of the creature revealed itself from beneath the ground, the moonlight that had been illuminating the group disappeared momentarily.

“Oh… shit.”

Someone muttered a vulgar curse from behind, but Choi Jiyeon had no time to rebuke them.

A giant serpent.

But it wasn’t in a healthy state.

Its black, green-tinged scales were cracked and broken in several places.

At the tip of its tail, something resembling a massive sword was hanging, chipped and shattered beyond recognition.

And—

From the middle of its body, two necks branched out.

Only one head remained. Even that was incomplete, with patches of missing flesh exposing the white bones underneath.

There was no comfort to be found in its damaged state.

– Sssss…

The serpent’s mouth opened, revealing its forked tongue.

The tongue, riddled with holes from missing flesh, oozed saliva.

Droplets of venom dripped from its gaping mouth, falling to the ground.

– Sizzle…!

The ground melted wherever the venom touched, emitting a horrifying sound as it sizzled away.

The sheer potency of the venom, more intense than anything they could have imagined, drained all color from the faces of Choi Jiyeon's group.

They instinctively knew.

One touch from that, and they were dead.

Would it be instant?

Or would they die slowly, writhing in agony?

Would they melt away? Or would they turn to stone, their eyes wide open as they perished?

The exact process was unknown.

But the outcome—death—was certain.

'Ah, shit.'

Choi Jiyeon cursed inwardly.

'I shouldn't have come here.'

What kind of nonsense was this during a school break?

– Shaaaaa!

As the serpent's gaping maw descended upon them, filled with regret, Choi Jiyeon braced herself.

* * *

The sound of the waterfall had become quite familiar to his ears.

'This is peaceful.'

As he splashed his legs in the water, ripples surged outward.

The once gentle, rhythmic waves were swallowed up by the stronger, irregular ripples.

It had been some time now since he had alternated between soaking in the lake and stepping out of it.

He couldn't shake the feeling of peace.

Unlike last time, this trip seemed like it would end quite smoothly.

He would just soak a little more, recharge, and then head out.

With a satisfied smile, he ran his wet fingers through his hair, feeling his core and circuits gradually expanding.

'…?'

At that moment, he felt a sense of discomfort.

It wasn't something he had paid attention to before, but the moment he became aware of it, the feeling intensified.

He blinked for a moment before pulling at a strand of his hair.

It was still attached.

'Huh.'

But the color was different.

It wasn't black—it was white.

‘Huh… ’

A question mark popped up above his head.

* * *

[Player Correction System: Measurement Mode]

…

▸Mental State

[?state] : ?

…

[Mental state [?state] is changing.]

CHAPTER 149
THE HANDSOME MAN AND THE WOODCUTTER (2)

The undead charged in.

A half-hearted roar echoed from the gaping maw of the snake.

The air quivered, and a faint poison crept over them.

It reeked of death.

In the ensuing sensation of hair standing on end, Choi Jiyeon moved without hesitation.

Drawing on the earth, she extended the handle of her axe.

She gripped it tightly, pulling her qi up to the physical limit throughout her body.

Immediately, she infused the handle with more power.

A thick layer of green qi enveloped the axe.

At the blade's edge, the qi surged violently, almost as if it were about to explode.

'Taesan.'

Taesan was her Unique Ability, one that allowed her to manipulate the earth.

In the process of controlling the earth, she manipulated the life force inherent in it, which sometimes allowed her to handle undead forces as well.

But at its core, Taesan was about commanding the powers of the earth.

Since ancient times, the earth had been considered the source of all life and a symbol of strength.

Choi Jiyeon drew upon that strength.

Her legs, firmly rooted in the ground, absorbed the earth's magic and life force, channeling it into her body.

Creak! The handle of the axe shuddered as if about to splinter.

A chilling, cracking sound echoed between her grip and the axe.

Gritting her teeth, Choi Jiyeon swung her arms in a wide arc.

The blade of the axe sliced through the air with a satisfying whoosh, descending in a fierce strike.

The axehead slammed down on the snake's skull, which had lunged toward her in a deadly strike.

– KWAANG!

"Ugh…!"

The snake's head, now embedded in the ground from the force of the blow, trembled.

A shockwave burst out in all directions.

It was as though an explosion had gone off—dirt and debris scattered, while the already-barren trees were snapped in half and sent flying.

Choi Jiyeon had no time to register any of that. Before she could recover from the aftershock, she leaped into the air.

Crash! The snake's deadly tail, tipped with a blade-like edge, slammed into

the spot where she had just stood.

'It's tough…!'

Her arms trembled with numbness. They wouldn't stop shaking as if they might snap at any moment.

Choi Jiyeon stared at her quivering hands.

Crunch… The axe was now a splintered shaft with only the handle remaining.

The upper half of the axe had completely shattered in the collision.

– Sssss!

Still, she had managed to inflict some damage.

The wounds on the snake's head—now thrashing about as it lifted itself from the ground—were evidence enough.

But it wasn't a fatal wound.

Her face twisted in frustration.

That was her first strike.

The blow she had delivered with all her strength, infused with the power of her Taesan Ability, failed to deliver the decisive hit.

'Around 4th Rank? It's not an Alpha.'

Choi Jiyeon coldly assessed the situation. The speed at which it targeted her, its ability to withstand her axe…

Judging by its physical prowess, it was a low-tier 4th Rank monster.

A 4th Rank monster was the type of beast that could appear as an Alpha entity in a Tier 2 dungeon. Even in the Demonic Realm, it was strong enough

to dominate a small region.

The difference between them wasn't insurmountable. Her strikes had landed. If she kept hammering away, it would eventually die.

Though she had never hunted a 4th Rank monster by herself, she knew it was possible.

'However… '

A chilling sensation washed over her.

The previous sense of danger felt like child's play compared to the life-threatening terror she was now experiencing.

The snake clamped its mouth shut and then began to swell.

It looked as though it were holding something in its mouth.

From the gaps in its rotting flesh, something oozed out, dripping from the snake's maw.

– Ssshhh…

A dense, greenish-black liquid leaked out… along with smoke.

Whatever it was, it was far more dangerous than what she had faced earlier.

"Dodge…!"

Choi Jiyeon shouted as she kicked off the ground.

Her team members, who had been holding their formation, followed suit and leaped into action.

The snake twitched its torn eyes as it opened its mouth wide.

A green tide surged forward.

The dark space, already dominated by the sinking sun, was now bathed in a sickly green light.

The stumps of trees, already stripped bare of their branches, were consumed by the venomous liquid. In mere moments, they dissolved completely, leaving no trace behind.

And that wasn't all.

Like a gas, the venom evaporated rapidly, spreading its deadly mist in all directions.

The ground, soaked in the poison, melted, sinking lower and lower. The untouched earth began to rot and decay as it absorbed the poisonous vapors.

The sky itself seemed to turn an eerie shade of green, filled with the deadly gas.

– Sssss…

Even after spewing such a massive amount of venom, the snake showed no sign of stopping. It continued to pour out poison as though a dam had burst, unleashing an endless flood.

The entire area was dead.

The region submerged in poison was, of course, beyond saving. But even areas many times larger were quickly becoming soaked in the spreading poison, dying in its wake.

And as the venom continued to expand exponentially, the team barely managed to escape its range, now standing on a raised hill, staring in shock at the poisonous waves below.

"…This is insane."

Choi Jiyeon muttered blankly. Her complexion had turned pale, as though she

were already dead.

The expressions on her team members' faces were no different.

Standing far away from the poisoned area, they could still feel the toxic gases seeping into the air, making their faces whiten even more.

'…That thing.'

That snake was undead.

A corpse long since robbed of its life force, now being forcibly moved by necromancy.

One way or another, it had to be weaker than it was in life. While various enhancements could boost its power, they rarely surpassed the original.

And judging by the state of the snake's body, there were no enhancements to speak of.

In fact, it looked unstable.

There was no need to examine it up close.

Even from a glance, it was clear that patches of flesh, bone, and scales were missing in unnatural ways.

Black magic and a patchwork of minor spirits filled those gaps. Anyone could see how unstable the creature was.

For someone trained in necromancy, like herself, Choi Jiyeon could see that the entire construction of this undead was just a mess.

Despite that, it was a 4th Rank entity.

In that case…

'What was it when it was alive…?'

Choi Jiyeon's face stiffened.

'Wait.'

A sudden thought struck her as she looked back at the undead spewing venom in the distance.

A serpent.

Its size was several times larger than any ordinary building.

Its scales were a sickly greenish-black, and its eyes gleamed with an eerie yellow.

A massive weapon dangled from the tip of its tail, and its two necks branched off midway.

One of its mouths was gushing out a seemingly endless stream of venom.

She had seen this somewhere before… in history books and in the classifications of high-tier monsters.

A 3rd Rank Alpha-level monster.

A toxic, green serpent with two heads, one of which spewed deadly poison.

'Twin-headed Venom Dragon… '

A 3rd Rank Alpha.

The legendary monster that had once brought the entire nation of China to its knees.

That very monster had returned as an undead.

– Ssss…

There was no time to dwell on it.

The undead serpent—the Venom Dragon—shook its head after unleashing a wave of poison and turned its gaze toward Choi Jiyeon.

The massive creature was approaching.

The distance between them shrank rapidly.

It was terrifying to watch the dragon advance, dragging the deadly waves of poison along with it.

Choi Jiyeon felt a deep, primal fear.

Her sense of life-threatening danger was overwhelming.

She could feel the plants withering and losing all life as they soaked in the poison.

She sensed the spirits that had once dwelled in the area vanishing, unable to resist the venomous tide.

Her survival instincts screamed at her.

Judging purely by the Venom Dragon's physical power, it was low-tier, even for a 4th Rank entity. It wasn't an Alpha. Choi Jiyeon had the ability to kill it.

If it were just its physical power, that is.

But considering its Unique Ability—the endless poison?

She couldn't kill it. The sheer amount of venom surrounding it made it impossible to get close.

Could she find and destroy the necromancer controlling it? Would the Venom Dragon simply wait while she did?

Even if she somehow located the necromancer, it wouldn't be easy. Whoever they were, they had managed to turn the Venom Dragon into an undead,

unstable as it might be.

Logically, trying to fight it here with her current forces was suicide.

They needed to retreat.

She had already sent a request for support to her family. Even if the mana field was unstable, the message should have gone through.

With the situation escalating this far, the Association would have noticed by now as well.

Choi Jiyeon turned her head.

Her team members, frozen in fear just like her, waited for her orders.

"…Retreat—"

—now.

Her words trailed off.

As she turned, she saw a young girl vomiting in the arms of one of her team members.

'Ah.'

It was the child rescued by Mumyeon.

The child's complexion was deathly black.

Even considering her condition, her skin was unnaturally dark.

Her eyes were glazed over, pupils shaking, and her fingers stiffened as if paralyzed.

It was poisoning.

Despite the magical protections and Unique Abilities Choi Jiyeon's team had cast, the child had inhaled enough of the venomous gas to be poisoned.

The only reason she hadn't died instantly was thanks to those protections.

But she was still poisoned.

One of the team members was feeding her antidote after antidote, pouring healing abilities into her, but there was little improvement.

"……"

All of them retreat.

Dragging the venomous dragon along as it closed the distance?

"Damn it."

She cursed under her breath for what felt like the hundredth time.

Her head hurt.

In her heart, she wanted to flee.

Who wouldn't want to run when their survival instincts were screaming at them to get away?

But she was, unfortunately, the heir of the Taesan Clan.

She was also the leader of Team 1 in this search operation.

"…I'm giving the order. All team members, retreat with the rescue target."

"What about you, ma'am?"

One of her team members asked anxiously.

Choi Jiyeon glanced at the rapidly approaching Venom Dragon.

She was terrified.

She wanted to run.

“I’ll buy some time and retreat separately.”

As the heir to Taesan, as the responsible leader of this mission, she couldn’t allow herself to flee.

“Ma’am!”

“You can’t do this!”

“Let us—”

“Shut up. Or I’ll kill you for insubordination.”

Their protests came immediately.

But Choi Jiyeon had no patience to deal with them gently. With a cold tone, she silenced the resistance and turned away.

“Team Leaders 2 and 3, adjust your formation and break through the encirclement. Afterward, detoxify the target and send an emergency signal to the Association. Evacuate the civilians.”

“But…!”

The team members still objected.

“…Don’t act like I’m already dead.”

Seeing the worry and sorrow in their eyes, not just blind obedience, Choi Jiyeon softened her tone.

“I’m doing this because I can still escape.”

As she spoke, Choi Jiyeon shared the vision of the spirits in the area.

Halfway down the deep ravine she had seen before.

There, floating in mid-air, was a dreamlike fog… the entrance to a dungeon.

* * *

His hair had turned completely white.

No matter how many times he checked, the color hadn't changed back.

'What now?'

Rubbing the strands between his fingers, he made a puzzled face.

Just moments ago, his hair had been black, but now it had turned white.

After retracing the information he had observed earlier, he realized the transformation had started about ten or fifteen minutes ago.

The change was still ongoing.

Even now, little by little, his hair continued to lighten.

It was far too rapid to be considered a natural greying.

To begin with, how often did one's hair just change color on its own?

'Wait a minute.'

A thought struck him, and he rubbed the strands of hair again.

The color was familiar.

Even within the same shade, there were slight variations, some subtle, some obvious.

This particular color was so unique that it was easy to distinguish.

‘This is almost the same as Lee Seo-yul’s hair color.’

Pure white, like freshly fallen snow, with an ethereal radiance of multiple colors… hair that looked otherworldly.

Though it wasn’t gleaming with multiple colors just yet, a quick observation confirmed that the color was nearly identical.

The mystical hair that only Lee Seo-yul, a newborn fairy, possessed.

And now his hair had turned almost the same color.

– I had suspected that Cadet Lee Hayul was not human, but rather some sort of fairy.

That statement still lingered in his mind.

‘I don’t know anymore.’

Rubbing his hair absentmindedly, he dipped back into the lake.

His body had been healing from minor injuries on its own, even regenerating the leg that had been crushed and severed earlier. It wasn’t surprising anymore.

At this point, a mere change in hair color was hardly a shock.

He submerged himself in the lake water.

– Bubble, bubble…

With his head submerged up to his mouth, he idly created bubbles on the lake’s surface for no reason.

Even now, he was focusing on absorbing more mana.

He didn’t want to waste any mental energy on unnecessary distractions.

‘The Proof of Protection should be appearing soon.’

He glanced over at the waterfall gently pouring into one corner of the lake.

Despite its substantial size, the waterfall was surprisingly calm.

As a result, the waves in the lake were also quite gentle.

Behind the waterfall was a small cave.

That was where the Proof of Protection would appear.

According to the original timeline, it was about to show itself any minute now.

‘I need to hurry and see Lee Seo-yul… ’

Far too much time had passed already.

If he left now, he might still have a few days to spend with Seo-yul.

With a sense of impatience, he bubbled the water even more.

The spirits that had wandered off to explore were beginning to return one by one.

‘They’re back sooner than I thought… huh?’

The spirits converged above the lake.

The lake’s surface shimmered with a variety of colors as they gathered.

For some reason, the spirits seemed brighter than before.

That wasn’t surprising.

‘Wait, who are these?’

The strange part was that there were more of them than before.

He had sent out about a hundred spirits, but now three times that number had returned.

With a bewildered expression, he gently poked at one of the spirits hovering near him.

The blue water spirit flinched as if tickled and floated a little farther away.

For the record, that spirit wasn't one he had contracted with.

He didn't even know whose spirit it was.

'What's going on?'

Even when he sent out his thoughts—his intent—the spirits only responded with vague feelings like happiness, ticklishness, and a desire for more affection.

Lower-ranked spirits had vague consciousnesses, making proper communication difficult.

'…Should I make a contract?'

He quickly checked the capacity of his vessel.

There was still plenty of room.

The reason he had only contracted with a hundred spirits before wasn't because he had reached his limit but because there hadn't been any more spirits available.

There was no downside to having more contracted spirits.

He moved closer to one of the spirits to initiate the contract.

– Wooooong!

At that moment, the lake rippled.

Small tremors, like tiny earthquakes, caused waves to spread across the surface. The lake's water turned yellow.

It was the same color as the yellow leaves floating on the surface.

'It's here.'

This was the signal for the appearance of the Proof of Protection.

The gimmick where the player had to spend several days submerged in the lake… an annoying yet simple event.

In less than ten seconds, the color of the lake returned to normal.

But a new piece of information was now visible, coming from the cave behind the waterfall.

With a smile, he turned toward the waterfall. It was on the opposite side of the lake.

He waded through the yellow leaves and colorful spirits floating around him, heading toward the waterfall.

As he crossed the center of the lake, the water grew deeper, reaching up to his mouth when he stood upright.

– Wooooooong!

'?'

The lake rippled again.

Waves rose up, slapping against his face.

'What's going on?'

The event only happened once.

He froze in place, scanning his surroundings. Was there some unexpected incident? He heightened his vigilance and began scanning the area.

Reflecting his own wariness, the spirits darted around, on guard for any unseen threats.

– Craaack

'?'

Something unexpected appeared on his radar.

Not just on his radar, but in the very space around him.

Above him.

The air itself shimmered, and then something—or rather, someone—was spat out of it.

'I need to intercept—wait, no!'

The moment he prepared to unleash a barrage of spells, he hurriedly stopped himself.

The spirits, who had been ready to launch attacks of all kinds, also pulled back in surprise, shrinking in size.

The person who had been spat out of the air wasn't unfamiliar.

'Choi Jiyeon?'

The heir of the Taesan Clan and one of the key characters of the story.

She was someone he had planned to meet during the second semester, but for some reason, she had appeared in the Lake of Mana.

He had heard she had been active in China recently… but he had never expected to encounter her here.

And in such a battered state, no less.

Choi Jiyeon, too weak to control her body, fell helplessly downward.

She seemed conscious, but unable to move properly.

He activated his levitation magic.

Choi Jiyeon, who had been about to crash into the middle of the lake, slowly floated down instead.

Reaching out to catch her, he hesitated for a moment.

His arm was short, and he wasn't very tall…

– Creak

Not to mention, considering his height… it would be a bit awkward to catch her directly.

With a dissatisfied expression, he manipulated the Wings of the Sky.

The sky-blue wings, divided into several strands, gently caught Choi Jiyeon.

"Ugh… ugh… I don't want to die…"

As he was preparing to set her down and leave the lake, Choi Jiyeon's body began to tremble.

Like someone in the throes of a nightmare, her eyelids fluttered, and slowly, she opened her eyes.

Her deep, green eyes stared in confusion.

She clearly didn't understand the situation.

Her gaze wandered around briefly before finally settling on him.

“…Ah…”

A faint whisper escaped Choi Jiyeon’s lips.

“…An angel?”

“?”

Did she hit her head?

End of Chapter.

CHAPTER 150
THE HANDSOME MAN AND THE WOODCUTTER (3)

The Death Cult has its roots in China.

It oversees hundreds of branches while managing the Grand Headquarters where Kyowon resides.

In the deep underground of the Grand Headquarters, a massive cavern was shrouded in darkness.

It was dark before, but now, even the faintest light source had vanished.

Kyowon's face, hidden by the shadows, twisted in agony.

Crack! A sharp tearing sound echoed from within his body. It was the sound of something twisting and breaking in the wrong direction.

His eyes flared wide open.

Blood vessels burst in his eyes, and his dark vision was tinged with crimson.

Kyowon gritted his teeth.

"Urgh… Aaaargh…!"

Blood-tinged foam leaked from his clenched lips.

This was the result of using necromancy far beyond his capabilities, and it was still being manifested.

This was not the plan.

He had no intention of carrying out the plan with such insufficient resources.

He had barely managed to retrieve the corpse of the Twin-headed Venom Dragon. While incomplete, he had gradually gathered remnants to fill in the missing parts.

The sacrifices were also insufficient. To resurrect a being of such high rank, defying the natural order, an equivalent offering was required.

He had established branches across various regions of China. His followers were sent to gather creatures to use as sacrifices. At one point, they were nearly caught by the Association, but they barely managed to escape.

Since then, he had acted cautiously. He lowered the quality and quantity of sacrifices and delayed the plan, prioritizing security and secrecy.

But recently, some crazy individuals had started destroying the branches, which were key to gathering the sacrifices.

Kyowon was furious, to the point where his blood seemed to boil, but he gritted his teeth and endured.

Mumyeon, that wretched nobody.

Skilled enough to kill his followers with ease. And rumors suggested he was part of the Association's enforcement division. If Kyowon personally went after Mumyeon, there was a risk of being caught by the Association once again.

The bastards from Taesan.

Even their heir had joined the fray, causing chaos. Kyowon could kill them if he acted directly, but the consequences would be severe.

If he killed the heir? The Association, which had been on their trail, and the full might of Taesan, who would seek vengeance for their fallen heir, would descend upon this land.

So he endured.

He prepared to hide once again, deeper than before. It was a heinous situation, but he had already endured for decades. He could manage a few more years.

Then the god delivered a revelation.

Do not hide deeper—carry out the plan immediately.

Kill the heir of Taesan and, more importantly, the wretched Mumyeon.

Thus, Kyowon proceeded. Now, he was suffering the severe backlash of using powers beyond his limits.

“Urgh…!”

His vision blurred. His consciousness faded.

In the dark void, death approached.

It wasn’t something to fear. For Kyowon, who worshiped the god of death, death was merely the entrance to paradise, something he would inevitably face.

It was something to welcome, but not now.

He had yet to complete the revelation.

It was a revelation delivered by the god of death himself. No matter the cost, it had to be fulfilled.

Kyowon was always ready to offer his life for martyrdom, but even he lacked the ability to fully realize the revelation.

Ordinarily, it would have been impossible.

Yet the god’s grace had allowed him to unleash necromancy beyond his

limits. A power far more formidable than his own had descended upon him.

He had succeeded in a necromantic ritual he would never have been able to achieve on his own.

While the result was imperfect, he had created the Twin-headed Venom Dragon as an undead creature.

But the backlash was enormous.

“Urgh…!!”

His intestines churned. His circuits twisted, and his core groaned.

The pain was like being shredded in a grinder.

If he lost focus for even a moment, his body would explode.

His face contorted as the chaotic collision of mana and necromantic backlash raged inside him.

‘The recoil… it’s much worse than I expected.’

Necromancy is a complex skill. It manipulates the bodies of the dead and controls the souls extracted from such corpses.

Moreover, the being he was trying to manipulate was the Twin-headed Venom Dragon, previously ranked as a 3rd Rank Alpha.

Even with thorough preparation, this was an exceptionally difficult task.

And yet, the ritual had been performed in an incomplete state.

The corpse of the Twin-headed Venom Dragon was lacking. Many parts were missing. Most notably, one of its heads, where its unique ability resided, could not be restored.

The sacrifices were also insufficient. While many had been gathered, the

shortage of proper offerings had severely diminished the quality of the ritual.

The burden on the caster had doubled as a result.

Kyowon turned his head.

Behind him lay the bodies of his followers, strewn across the floor. They were all believers of the Death God, practitioners of necromancy themselves.

They were all dead. None had survived for even a moment longer. In truth, they were no different from sacrifices meant to lessen Kyowon's burden. They had embraced their deaths with joy, offering their lives as martyrs to the Death God.

Yet Kyowon still stood on the brink of death. If it weren't for the sacrifices offered by the martyrs, he, too, would have burst and died long ago.

"Well, what a sight. I can't even tell who's the corpse anymore."

A carefree voice suddenly reached Kyowon's ears.

At the same time, he heard deliberate footsteps cutting through the ringing in his ears.

A man approached Kyowon, stepping into the faint light that barely illuminated the area.

The light revealed the man's blood-red eyes and hair.

"Tsk, tsk…"

The man's gaze flickered over the dead followers lying on the floor.

Their decayed bodies had exposed mana circuits, so broken that they had exploded. Blood poured from every orifice of their faces, leaving them limp and lifeless.

The man's face twisted into a grimace.

Calling that martyrdom? These people were truly insane.

"What do you want…?"

Kyowon barely managed to open his mouth. Just speaking was an arduous task as he endured the backlash.

"Nothing in particular. There's been so much gossip recently, I just came to take a look."

Kyowon had spoken through immense pain, yet the response he received was indifferent.

Kyowon's face contorted in anger.

"Oh, can your face get even more twisted than that? Impressive."

"You… insane fool… do you not… understand the gravity… of this situation?"

"It's a big deal to you, sure. But to us? It's nothing of importance. Don't drag us into your mess."

"Blasphemy… Your god… surely desires war as well… If so—"

"God?"

Kyowon's words were abruptly cut off.

The man who had interrupted him blinked in confusion, as if he didn't comprehend what Kyowon was saying.

Then, as if understanding dawned on him, the man opened his mouth and let out a small exclamation.

"God? You call that a god? Hahaha!"

The man burst into laughter. His loud, booming laugh echoed through the cavern, making Kyowon's temples throb.

"You're a lunatic. Worshiping that thing and calling it a god."

The man's next words caused Kyowon's already twisted face to contort even further in rage.

Crack! Kyowon gritted his teeth so hard that his already damaged molars cracked audibly.

Kyowon glared at the man with eyes wide in fury.

"You…! Watch that filthy… mouth of yours…!"

"Who are you to give me orders? And why are you so angry? I should be the one pissed here. Don't lump me in with your cult. We aren't the same."

The dying Kyowon unleashed his killing intent. The aura of a necromancer at his peak spread through the room.

For an ordinary person, even a brief exposure to such a presence would cause them to faint.

Yet the man didn't flinch. In fact, he scoffed, releasing his own aura to crush Kyowon's killing intent in an instant.

Boom! The walls of the cavern shook from the force. Debris fell from the ceiling.

"Ugh…"

"Even if I'm a toothless tiger now, do you really think I'd lose to an old relic like you?"

The man sneered as he lifted the corners of his mouth.

“If you want to live out the rest of your short life, stay quiet. Otherwise, I’ll put you down myself before nature takes its course. I’m just here to watch. That’s all.”

Kyowon was dying. It wouldn’t be long before death claimed him. The only question was whether he had days, weeks, or merely hours left.

In the man’s eyes, Kyowon wouldn’t last more than a few months at most.

A heavy silence followed.

“Hmph.”

The silence was broken.

Kyowon, blood bubbling on his lips, let out a small chuckle.

“How… amusing.”

“Huh?”

Did he have a death wish? The man blinked in confusion.

“You… are merely a servant… bound to your god… You cannot… kill me… by your own will…”

“……”

The man’s face darkened, devoid of emotion.

He didn’t release his killing intent. Instead, with an expressionless face, he reached for the sword at his waist.

But his hand stopped.

As if something had gripped him in midair, his hand froze in place.

Veins bulged on the back of his hand. His fingers trembled slightly.

-Whoosh!

Flames ignited. Thick, dark red fire flared in his palm.

Yet his hand remained motionless.

“…You damned bastard.”

The man muttered a low curse.

The insult was directed not only at the old man mocking him but also at the accursed thing that bound him.

He released the tension in his hand. The flames fizzled out.

As soon as the fire extinguished, the force restraining him vanished.

“Ugh, screw it. Looking at you, it seems you’re about to die soon anyway. I’m leaving.”

The man, his face twisted in annoyance, turned to leave.

Kyowon called out to him.

“Do not… worry… I will complete the revelation… and ascend to paradise.”

The man’s steps abruptly halted.

“Complete the revelation and ascend? Well, I doubt that’s going to happen.”

“…On what grounds… do you dare deny… the will of the god?”

The man seemed to mull over the question, then turned his head to glance at Kyowon.

“Just a hunch.”

“…You… madman.”

The response wasn't even worth dignifying with a reply.

Kyowon's face crumpled in disgust.

CHAPTER 151
PROOF OF PROTECTION

⁎ ⁎ ⁎

“An… angel?”

‘Did she hit her head?’

That was the conclusion I came to after seeing Choi Jiyeon suddenly asking about an angel when she looked at me.

It made sense. Choi Jiyeon was covered in wounds. It looked like she’d been struck in the head too, with blood matting her hair.

She must have been disoriented, causing her to say nonsensical things.

“Angel… am I dead?”

‘Let’s heal her first.’

“I… I don’t want to die…”

‘You’re not dead… ’

I couldn’t just leave an injured person like this, so I lifted her out of the lake.

Choi Jiyeon was wrapped in the Wings of the Sky as I carefully pulled her out, ensuring her injuries didn’t worsen.

I placed her down gently on the grass, which had already been soaked with healing magic.

“Ah, ah…?”

That’s when it happened.

The dullness in Choi Jiyeon’s eyes cleared up.

“W-what the…”

As soon as her gaze focused on me, Choi Jiyeon flinched and trembled.

Her eyes quivered, darting around as if unsure where to look.

Then, her face flushed bright red.

– Wriggle, wriggle.

On top of that, she started wriggling like a caterpillar.

Seeing this odd reaction, I frowned and used the Wings of the Sky to gently restrain her squirming.

“Uh… um, excuse me…”

‘Wait, hold still—’

“Your, your clothes…”

‘—wait… clothes?’

Suddenly, a thought struck me, freezing me in place.

Choi Jiyeon was covering her eyes with her hands.

…Where had I come from?

Oh, right. I had just come out of the lake.

And what state was I in when I entered the lake…?

I stood there with my mouth agape for a moment, then used [Observation] to check.

I didn’t even need to do that.

The breeze brushing against my bare skin was enough of a clue.

'Ah.'

I wasn't wearing clothes.

The only thing covering me was the Wings of the Sky. There were no clothes, no Necklace of Confession, nothing else.

Scratching my head awkwardly, I quickly retrieved my clothes from where they were draped over the rocks.

.

.

.

It didn't take me more than a minute to get dressed.

All I had to do was shake the water off my body and hair and put on my clothes.

In the brief time that took, it seemed Choi Jiyeon had regained her composure, as she was now fanning her flushed face with her hand.

'……'

I figured my face was probably as red as hers.

To make a first impression like this… I couldn't imagine a more embarrassing situation.

On top of that, she had seen the hideous burn scars on my body. What if it disgusted her…?

'What if her opinion of me has plummeted after this… I still need her help with the issue regarding Seo-yul… '

I had terrible luck.

Of all places to run into her, it had to be here.

[Hello.]

“Oh, oh! Yes, hello! Uh… Lee Hayul, right?”

[Yes.]

[Choi Jiyeon.]

“Um… ahem! Thanks for catching me. I almost fell completely unguarded.”

I managed to smooth out the expression that had been threatening to crumble as I approached her.

Choi Jiyeon, who had been staring off into the distance, startled and greeted me back.

…Judging by her reaction, it seemed like my first impression really had been ruined.

Just as I let out a long sigh internally, it happened.

“…Ah! This isn’t the time for this…!”

Suddenly, Choi Jiyeon’s eyes shot open wide, and she quickly tried to get up. However, her brow furrowed slightly from the strain.

Her injuries had reopened a bit.

[You shouldn’t move too vigorously.]

[Your wounds have reopened.]

[You need to recover for a bit.]

“No, I don’t have time for that!”

Despite my attempts to hold her back, Choi Jiyeon frantically looked around, as if searching for an exit from the dungeon.

A sense of foreboding washed over me.

Thanks to the Power of Observation, I could accurately assess her injuries.

Choi Jiyeon was covered in wounds.

She had been beaten, bruised, and broken in several places. There were also large gashes, as if she had been slashed by a greatsword, alongside various other injuries.

None of them were fatal. As a superhuman, her body was far more resilient than that of an ordinary person.

Moreover, Choi Jiyeon was a manifestor of Taesan.

The earth manipulated by Taesan was capable of endless change.

If it rose up, it became an unyielding wall. If it wrapped around her body, it became an indestructible armor.

When wielded, it became a bludgeon. When thickened, it became a shield capable of blocking attacks.

And that’s not all.

Soil, rock, plants, and the roots embedded in the ground, as well as the creatures living on it…

The earth was teeming with life.

A manifestor of Taesan could manipulate the earth. Moreover, they could sense and utilize the life force present within it.

That life force, in essence, was the source of life itself.

When drawn into the body, it could drastically accelerate the body's natural healing process.

With extreme training, manifestors of Taesan could even develop their expansion ability to achieve super regeneration.

Taesan's defense and recovery capabilities were on that level.

And Choi Jiyeon was one of the most talented individuals in Taesan's history.

Yet despite that, her body had accumulated these severe injuries.

Even now, she was likely unconsciously absorbing the earth's life force to heal herself. But the healing process was unusually slow.

More concerning…

'Poison?'

It wasn't just external wounds; poison had seeped into her body in several places.

The moment I detected the poison, a chill ran down my spine.

This was dangerous. It wasn't just any ordinary poison.

Upon closer inspection, it seemed the reason her recovery was delayed was that her life force was being used to neutralize the poison.

'…Poison?'

A sense of urgency surged through me, as if warning signals were going off in my head.

I felt uneasy.

In the back of my mind, scenarios I shouldn't even be imagining—things that shouldn't happen—began to surface.

"Twin-headed Venom Dragon."

One such scenario—a nightmare that should never happen—was confirmed by Choi Jiyeon's next words.

"Outside, the Twin-headed Venom Dragon has been reborn as an undead and is rampaging."

[This is fucking insane.]

"Pardon?"

[My mistake.]

Choi Jiyeon blinked in confusion, as if unsure whether she had heard me correctly.

"Just now…"

[More importantly, we need to get out of here quickly.]

"Uh… yeah, right."

Though she tilted her head in slight confusion, Choi Jiyeon stood up, agreeing that we needed to leave.

If what she said was true, then this wasn't just a serious situation—it was a crisis.

This was no time to be leisurely taking a bath.

We needed to get outside and assess the situation as quickly as possible.

"I definitely fell from the sky…"

She tilted her head back, looking up at the sky.

She was probably trying to find the exit, but unfortunately, there wasn't one.

The entrance and exit of the Lake of Mana open randomly, approximately every three to four days.

Choi Jiyeon had shared her story earlier. She had been chased by the Twin-headed Venom Dragon and had jumped into a canyon that appeared to be the dungeon's entrance.

Setting aside her boldness, I was curious how she had managed to enter the Lake of Mana.

'…The entrance must have briefly opened.'

Thanks to the Power of Space, I could read the space… the dungeon, which was a type of subspace, as well.

The dungeon's entrance had briefly opened earlier.

During that moment, Choi Jiyeon had fallen through.

And immediately after, the entrance had closed.

If that was the case, one question remained.

According to Choi Jiyeon, the Twin-headed Venom Dragon had followed her. But why hadn't it entered the dungeon?

Had it assumed she died after seeing her leap into the canyon?

Or perhaps it had followed her closely, but by some stroke of luck, the entrance had closed just in time?

The thought sent a chill down my spine.

If things had played out differently, the Twin-headed Venom Dragon might

have fallen from the sky after Choi Jiyeon.

If that had happened… the thought alone was terrifying.

[I know the way out.]

[Follow me.]

Choi Jiyeon's face lit up at my words.

Technically, I wasn't lying. I could open the exit.

I turned and began walking, with Choi Jiyeon following close behind.

Our destination was the cave behind the waterfall.

'Even if we leave, I need to collect the Proof of Protection.'

We made our way around the lake, heading toward the waterfall.

The flow of the waterfall was gentle, so there wasn't much spray.

Still, crossing through it would mean getting drenched.

I planned to use wind magic…

– Woooong…!

[Oh…]

[Thanks.]

…But before I could, the Water Spirit shifted the trajectory of the waterway.

A large hole opened in the waterfall, revealing the cave beyond.

The Water Spirit playfully hovered around my fingertip. Amused by its innocent gesture, I chuckled and gently stroked the tip of my finger against

it.

Satisfied, the Water Spirit then vanished with a little pop.

I hopped into the cave.

“What’s that…?”

Choi Jiyeon tilted her head as she stared at the object in the center of the cave.

At the center of the cave was a stone altar.

The altar was adorned with geometric patterns, and atop it rested a cube.

The cube was transparent, like glass.

It contained a warm, golden light, as if it had captured sunlight within.

It was the Proof of Protection, one of the main objectives of this outing, and it had yet to be unlocked.

I gazed at it with a curious expression.

‘…Will it unlock?’

It was the ‘Locked Proof of Protection.’

While I had obtained it, using it was a different matter altogether.

The Proof of Protection chose its owner.

The artifact judged the individual, and only if it deemed the person worthy, would they be recognized as its user.

If not? It would become nothing more than a decorative item or a useless relic.

From what I remembered, the requirement was related to one's alignment.

The system description mentioned that it chose individuals from the 'Good' alignment through strict selection.

In the original, the first time I acquired the Proof of Protection was during the 9th cycle, the 'Glutton' cycle.

That was the run where I had thrown away any pretense of goodness, fully embracing the path of villainy.

Naturally, I couldn't use the Proof of Protection, which required a Good alignment. In that cycle, I had just sold it off to the black market.

'Can I… use it?'

I wasn't sure.

I had only read that it required a Good alignment, but I wasn't sure if I truly met that criterion, nor to what extent.

More importantly, I wasn't even sure whether I fell under the category of 'Good.'

To be honest, I had never considered myself a good person.

Unlike truly good people, I wasn't one to act without hesitation for others, disregarding my own losses.

'…Let's take it for now.'

Regardless, I had to collect it.

With a complicated expression, I strode forward and picked up the cube.

'If I can't use it… I'll just regenerate and sell it at the auction house… or give it to someone else—'

– Wooong!

The moment I picked it up.

The cube began to tremble.

‘What’s this.’

Suddenly, my thoughts were interrupted as memories flashed before my eyes like a panorama.

It felt like something was rummaging through my past.

My childhood, the fire, the orphanage, the bullying, the fire again, the release, society, the convenience store, the car accident, the legs…

Ugh…

This world, the curse, Shio-ram, growth, cherished people.

Hmm…?

Shipnaha, Aerulus, civilians, denial, resolve, action, death, relief…

…Whoa…

– Clack.

There was the sound of a lock being undone.

It wasn’t an actual sound. It just felt that way.

As soon as I sensed this, the cube began to melt away.

It dissolved into countless particles of light.

The golden particles floated in the air and adhered to the empty space where my left arm used to be.

The light clustered around my shoulder and began to extend downward.

It looked as though countless fireflies were gathering to form an arm.

Soon, the particles of light dispersed.

In their place, I could feel something.

Something had filled the empty space where nothing had been.

A prosthetic arm, snow-white and crude in its form…

'…Could it be… unlocked?'

Was it really that easy?

With a dumbfounded expression, I tapped the prosthetic limb attached where my left arm used to be.

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